A MODERN MERCENARY

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A MODERN MERCENARY

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BY

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[E. AND H. HERON]

NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY & McCLURE CO.
1899

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	A Lieutenant of Frontier Cavalry	1
II.	A Gentleman of the Guard	14
III.	The Gentlemen of the Guard	28
IV.	Danger Signals	41
V.	Good Luck and a Firefly	48
VI.	The Cloister of St. Anthony	62
VII.	One Woman's Diplomacy	79
VIII.	A Question of the Guard	94
IX.	The Castle of Sagan	106
X.	Count Simon of Sagan	120
XI.	A Counsel of Expediency	130
XII.	Anthony Unziar	136
XIII.	Love in Two Shades	144
XIV.	Half a Promise	153
XV.	Colendorp	159
XVI.	'With Your Lips to the Hurt'	170
XVII.	Iris	177
XVIII.	The Sword of Unziar	186
XIX.	In Diplomatic Relations	195
XX.	Under the Pines	202
XXI.	Love's Beggar	210
XXII.	In Love with Honour	222
XXIII.	How Rallywood had His Orders	233
XXIV.	On the Frontier	239

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXV.	A Question of Two Moralities	246
XXVI.	Love's Handicap	258
XXVII.	The Man of the Hour	267
XXVIII.	The Arrest	277
XXIX.	The Court-Martial	282
XXX.	'Upon the Great World's Altar-Stairs'	292
XXXI.	Duke Gustave	300
XXXII.	For a Season	307

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CHAPTER I.

A LIEUTENANT OF FRONTIER CAVALRY.

DURING four months of the year the independent State of Maäsau,' we will call it—which is not very noticeable even on the largest sized map of Europe—is tormented by a dry and weary north-east wind. And nowhere is its influence more unpleasantly felt than in the capital, Révonde, which stands shoulder-on to the hustling gales, its stately frontages and noble quays stretching out westwards along the shores of the Kofn almost to where the yellow waters of the river spread fan-wise into a grey-green sea.

The *tsa* was blowing strongly on a certain November afternoon, eddying and whistling about the wide spaces of the Grand Square as John Rallywood, a tall figure in a military cloak, turned the corner of a side street and met its full blast. He faced it for some yards along the empty pavements, then ran up the steps of his club. A few minutes later he passed through a lofty corridor and entered a door over

which is set a quaint invitation to smokers, which may not be written down here, for it is the jealously guarded copyright of the club.

It chanced that the room for the moment had but one occupant, who sat in a roomy armchair by the white stove. This gentleman did not raise his head, but continued to gaze thoughtfully at his well shaped though square and comfortable boots.

Rallywood paused almost imperceptibly in his stride.

'Hullo, Major! Glad to see you,' he said, as he dropped into an armchair opposite.

Major Counsellor stood up with his back to the stove, thereby giving a view of a red, challenging face, heavy eyebrows, and a huge white droop of moustache. He looked down at Rallywood considerингly before he spoke. 'So you're here. I imagined they kept you pretty closely on the frontier. 'The world been kicking you?'

Rallywood laughed.

'No, but it would do me good to kick the world,' he answered as he helped himself from the Major's cigar case. 'Five years, almost six, spent on the frontier, with nothing to show for it, isn't good enough. I've come up to send in my papers.'

"Then you'll be a fool,' returned the Major with decision.

Rallywood was busy lighting his cigar; when that was arranged to his satisfaction he said easily—

'Just so. History repeats itself.'

Counsellor stood squarely upright with his hands behind him.

'Any other reasons?' he asked.

'Plenty.'

'Pity! Are they serious or—otherwise?'

Rallywood pulled his moustache.

'Why is it a pity?' he asked slowly.

'Because there is going to be trouble here, and with trouble comes a chance.'

Rallywood smoked on in silence. He was a big, shallow-flanked man with the marks of the world upon him, and that indescribable air which comes to one who has passed a good portion of his time in laughing at the arbitrary handicaps arranged by Fate in the race of life.

'Where do you propose to go?' asked Counsellor after an interval.

'Back to Africa, I think—Buluwayo, Johannesburg, anywhere. South Africa's still in the bud, you see.'

'Yes, but it is a biggish bud and will take time to blow. You can afford to wait and—it may be worth your while.'

Rallywood threw a swift glance at Counsellor's inscrutable face.

'Seven years ago,' he said in a deliberate manner, 'you told me it was worth while, but life has not grown more interesting since then.'

'Ah!' Counsellor paused, then went on with a grim smile, 'At your age, John, there are possi-

bilities. Think over it. After hanging on here for more than five years why lose your chance now? Look at those fellows.' He pointed out into the square.

Rallywood rose lazily and gazed out also. The prospect was not cheering. A few troopers, their cloaks flapping in the wind, were galloping across the square on the way to relieve guard at the Palace, and under the statue of the late Grand Duke on horseback three men in tall hats stood talking together; then they turned and walked towards the club.

'Know them?' asked Counsellor.

Rallywood shook his head.

'The man with the beard is Stokes of the 'Times:' next him is Bradley; he's on another big daily. Their being here speaks for itself. Maäsau is going to take up people's attention shortly. The Grand Duke is in a tight place, and there will be a flare-up sooner or later.'

'And you advise me to stop and see it through?' said Rallywood meditatively from the window; then he lounged back to his chair. 'How will it end?'

Counsellor shook the ash from his cigar.

'Selpdorf is the man of the hour,' he said.

On the autumn evening when these two men were talking at the club the Duchy of Maäsau was, in the opinion of Maäsaun patriots, going as fast as it could to the devil. With them, it may be added, the devil was personified and bore the name of a

neighbouring nation. The one person who ignored this fact was the Grand Duke. With an inset, stubborn pride he believed that his country must remain for ever, as the long centuries had known her, Maäsau the Free. This being the case, he felt himself at liberty to spend his time in cursing the fate that had refused blue seas and skies to wintry Révonde, thus depriving it of these sources of revenue which depend upon climate, and which are enjoyed by places far less naturally beautiful than the capital of Maäsau.

The Duke, prematurely aged, by the manner of his life, made it his chief business to devise schemes for raising money whereby he might carry on the staling pleasures of his youth. Beyond this the administration of public affairs was left entirely in the supple hands of the Chancellor, M. Selpdorf, while the Duke, with those who surrounded him, plunged into the newest excitement of the hour, for who knew what a day might bring forth? The Court was like a stage lit by lurid light, on which the actors laughed and loved, danced and fought to the music of a wild finale, that whirled and maddened before the crash of the coming end.

Once upon a time Maäsau was accounted of no particular importance or value amongst its bigger neighbours; but of late, for various reasons, its fortunes had become the subject of attention and discussion in at least three foreign chancelleries, where old maps were being looked up and new ones bought and

painted different colours, according as seemed most desirable by the bearded men, who sat in council to apportion the marsh, rock, dune, and forest of which the now absorbingly interesting pigmy State was composed.

In fact, Maäsau, with its twenty miles or so of seaboard, containing one excellent port *in esse* and two others *in posse,* had become a Naboth's vineyard to a country almost land-bound and yet dreaming of the supremacy of the four seas. On this ambition and its possible consequences the other Great Powers looked, to speak diplomatically, with coldness.

It was generally understood that the English Foreign Office desired the maintenance of the *status quo;* France was supposed to be ready to clap a young republic on the back and to accord it her protection, while Russia played her own dumb and blinding game, of which none could definitely pronounce the issue. The political world thus stood at gaze, watching every change and prepared to take advantage of any chance that offered. The honours of the game so far had lain with M. Selpdorf, who scored each trick with the same bland smile. Whenever the Treasury of Maäsau was at a low ebb Selpdorf usually had a thirteenth card to lay upon the table, and as the nations cautiously proceeded to frustrate each other's purposes royal remittances from Heaven knows where flowed in abundantly to replenish the bankrupt exchequer of the State.

When Major Counsellor expressed his emphatic

disapproval of the intended resignation of Rallywood a new development was in the air. Hitherto the lead had mostly devolved upon Selpdorf; on this occasion he was known to be hanging back, and the question of who would take the initiative was the question of the day. The fact that Germany had lately accredited a new representative, a certain Baron von Elmur, to the Court of Maäsau,—an able man whose reputation rested mainly on the successful performance of missions of a delicate nature,—added to the tension of the moment.

'So you say they are getting up steam in Maäsau?' said Rallywood again. 'I have been out in the wilds for the last six months, and don't know so much about events as I might.'

'Steam? growled Counsellor. 'Steam enough to wreck Europe! I almost wish I'd never godfathered you into this blessed little stoke-hole. Why the deuce didn't you enlist at home instead of coming here?'

'That was out of the question, of course.'

'Why? Isn't our army good enough for you to fight in?'

'If it was only that!—I could fight in the ranks, God knows, but I couldn't parade in them! Besides, the life here suited me—then.'

'What's gone wrong with it now? I should have thought you would have got used to it by this time,' observed Counsellor with the air of the older man. It was not the first occasion on which he had played

the part of elderly relative towards Rallywood during the course of their queer, rough-grained friendship—a friendship of a type which exists only between man and man, and even then is sufficiently rare.

'Precisely, I'm too infernally used to it! It was not half bad as long as the newness lasted, but I can't stand it any longer! I'm sick of the monotony. Do you know old Fitzadams's criticism on the service here? "Dust and drill, drill and dust, and fill in the chinks with homicidal manœuvres.' "

'Maäsau only apes its betters. These Continental armies devote themselves very assiduously to rehearsals, and there is no end of waste about the process,' remarked Counsellor. 'They rehearse in summer and get sunstroke; then they rehearse in winter with rheumatisms and lung troubles growing on every bush. The bill for blank cartridges alone is enormous! And all because they have no India and no Africa, as we have, where we can give our fellows a taste of the real thing any day in the week. We carry on a small war with a regiment, or despatch a youngster with half a company to teach manners and honesty to twenty thousand niggers. The peculiarity of our army is that it is always at war. In this way we escape the dangers of theory, and get practice with something for our money into the bargain.'

'Our plan has its advantages,' agreed Rallywood lazily. 'I saw in South Africa what a little active

service does for a man. The first time he is under fire he is persuaded that he is going to be killed, and that every shot must hit him. But after a trial or two he begins to think the odds are in his favour and he becomes a much more effective fighting machine.'

'Necessarily he does. We don't half realise the value of our colonies yet—as a training ground for our soldiers. The British army is the smallest in Europe, but it remains to be seen what account it will give of itself if it is ever brought into contact with these huge, peace-trained conscript monsters.'

'When the Duke dies——' began Rallywood, harking back to the former topic of conversation.

The door was softly opened, and a waiter advanced into the room, bearing a letter for Rallywood, who took it and laid it down on the table beside him, then looked at Counsellor for an answer to his half spoken question. Counsellor shrugged his shoulders.

'Who can tell?' he replied. 'Meanwhile take the gifts the gods have sent you to-day,' and he pointed to the long, heavily sealed envelope that lay at Rallywood's elbow. 'Selpdorf, I see, already has his finger upon you.'

Rallywood broke the great seals, and, having read, he tossed the paper into the other's hands.

'He wishes to see me at 9:30. What can he want with me?' he asked.

'Probably he has heard you intend to cut the ser-

vice. It appears to me, Rallywood, that your chance has come out to meet you.'

'How could he have heard that I meant to go? And what can it matter to any one if I do?' went on Rallywood incredulously.

Counsellor shook his head, but made no other reply.

'A lieutenant of the Frontier Cavalry,' resumed Rallywood, 'is merely a superior make of excise officer!'

'You will be something more or something else before 10, I expect. As for what he wants with you, that is for you to find out—if you can.'

'It is to be hoped he may feel moved to let me have my arrears of pay,' said Rallywood, relapsing into his usual tone of indifference; 'that is the chief consideration with us on the frontier just now.'

'He probably will if it suits him—or rather perhaps if you suit him. Come over and dine with me presently at the Continental. There's generally a decent dinner to be had there.'

John Rallywood, one of the old Lincolnshire Rallywoods, had been born to a fortune, and moreover with an immense capacity for enjoying it after a wholesome fashion. Queens Fain had fallen to him while still an infant upon the death of a great-uncle, and with the old place were connected all those hundred untranslatable ties and associations which go to make up a boy's dreams. He was a man of suppressed, perhaps half unconscious, but

nevertheless deep-rooted enthusiasms; hence when the blow fell which deprived him not only of his inheritance, but also cut short the life of his mother, the unexpected, almost intolerable anguish he silently endured had left a deep, defacing scar upon his personality.

Up to twenty-two the record of his life, if not striking, had been clean and manly. He had passed through Sandhurst, and joined a dragoon regiment for something over a year, when an older branch of the family, supposed for a quarter of a century to be extinct, suddenly presented itself very much alive in the person of a middle-aged, middle-class American. Within three months the man's claim was substantiated, and estate, fortune, position, and home—as far as John Rallywood was concerned—had melted into thin air.

During this period of disruption and trouble Counsellor, who happened to be distantly connected with him, came into his life. They did not meet very often and spoke little when together, but mutual knowledge and liking resulted. Friendship is a living thing: it cannot be made; it grows.

Rallywood, when he turned to seek the means of a livelihood, found himself, as he said long afterwards, standing in the corridor of life with all the doors shut and no key to open them.

His tastes and training alike led in the direction of a military career, and presently he went out to the Cape, where he spent a year or two in a police

force which was in time disbanded, and he returned to England once more at a loose end.

At this juncture Major Counsellor suggested to him the possibility of obtaining a commission in the little army of the Duchy of Maäsau. This hint set him on the right track. The regiments of Maäsau, though few in number, carried splendid traditions. Their ranks were drawn from a stolid, silent peasantry, and officered by a wire-strung, high tempered aristocracy, born of a mixed race, it is true, but none the less frantically devoted to the freedom and independence of their shred of a fatherland.

In compliance with a private request on the part of Major Counsellor the British Minister at Révonde bestirred himself to procure a commission for Rallywood, who thus became a lieutenant in the Frontier Cavalry, and for more than five years had taken his share in riding and keeping the marches of Maäsau gaining much experience in capturing smugglers and in superintending the digging out of snowed up trains. But life on the frontier, though crammed with physical activity and routine work, was in every other respect monotonously empty, and breaks in the shape of furlough were few and far between. Half liked, wholly respected, and a little feared amongst his comrades, but always remaining a lieutenant to whom now, the State owed eighteen months' arrears of pay, Rallywood, inreturn, owed to Maäsau only the qualified service of an unpaid man, but gave it the full devotion of a capable officer.

As to Counsellor, no one could quite account for his presence at Révonde at the present moment. He was supposed to be attached in some indefinite way to the Legation, but he described himself as a bird of passage, whose appearance in the European capital simply meant whim or pleasure, for he was growing old and lazy and could not be brought to account for his wanderings, which he assured those who ventured to enquire were chiefly undertaken in search of health. Nevertheless wherever he went or came something interesting in a political sense—and more often than not, in favour of British interests—was almost sure to happen.

In former days he had filled the position of military attaché to two or three of the more important embassies, and was said to be the best known man in Europe. He had, moreover, the right to carry upon his breast the ribbon and decoration of more than one exclusive and distinguished Order. Of the many rumours associated with him this saying was certainly true: that one could never enter the smoking-room of any diplomatic club in any city in Europe without standing a fair chance of encountering Major Counsellor warming himself beside the stove?

Therefore he had naturally an enormous circle of acquaintance, each individual knowing very little about him, though he always formed an interesting subject of conversation, and a political opinion backed by his name became at once important.

CHAPTER II.

A GENTLEMAN OF THE GUARD.

SHORTLY before 9.30 Rallywood presented himself at the granite palace, with its four cupolas, which M. Selpdorf occupied in his capacity of First Minister of State. After some slight delay he was ushered into a comfortable study, where he found Selpdorf with a reading-lamp at his elbow, glancing rapidly through a mass of papers that he threw one after another, with apparent carelessness, on the floor beside him.

The chancellor of a small State might very well have been pardoned had he introduced a certain amount of what an old official used to call 'desk dignity' into his dealings with those who approached him, but Selpdorf habitually affected an easy manner and an easy chair. He was a middle-sized man, possessed of a very round head, bald at the crown, but having still a lock of dark hair on the summit of his round forehead; very round eyes set far back in smooth holes, showing little lid; a nose blunt and thick over lips that might have been coarse, but were controlled, and betrayed a lurking humour at the corners, to which the upstanding moustaches seemed to add point. For all his peculiarity of as-

pect, he was a man who left an impression on the memory of something pleasing and attractive, especially in the minds of women.

He received Rallywood with that air of deep personal interest which told with such happy effect on those whom he desired to influence.

'Ah, my dear Lieutenant, I understood you were in Révonde, and took the advantage of your presence to put into effect a little plan which has been for some time in contemplation. I recollect having had the pleasure of meeting you not so long ago when you arrived in Maäsau.'

'Nearly six years ago, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood with a smile.

'I can scarcely believe it to be so long. At any rate I remember perfectly that I had the honour of presenting you to his Highness as the latest addition to our Frontier Cavalry.'

'Your Excellency might easily have forgotten. From the nature of the case that could not be possible with me.'

Selpdorf listened with a little astonishment. This Englishman was not quite such a fool as one might have expected from the fact of his having been content to remain without preferment and only a proportion of his pay for over five years on the frontier. He had hoped to find the fellow adaptable, but this long-limbed, slow-spoken gentleman was not altogether so transparent an individuality as Selpdorf had led himself to expect.

'But why have you secluded yourself for so long among those barbarous marshes and forests?' demanded the Chancellor in a rallying manner. The young man made no reply, though the obvious one was in his mind.

'By-the-by,' resumed the Chancellor, as if struck by a new thought, 'I have heard that your countryman Major Counsellor has come to pay us a little visit in Maäsau.'

'He is here. I have just seen him,' replied Rallywood.

Selpdorf's round eyes glanced once more at his companion. The simple directness of the reply was admirable but baffling.

'Ah, he is invaluable, the good Major, quite invaluable! England may well be proud of him. He is one of the ablest men in Europe, besides'—here he smiled, showing a row of strong, even teeth—'besides being one of the most honest. For a diplomatist—what praise!'

Rallywood met his glance imperturbably.

'For a diplomatist, your Excellency?' he repeated.

'But assuredly,' replied the Chancellor warmly: 'figure to yourself, my friend, the condition of politics if all statesmen were like him—honest! An invaluable man!'

He paused for a reply, but Rallywood merely bowed. He felt that so much at least was expected of him on the part of England.

'But now, monsieur, with regard to your own

affair. You have been five years in the service of his Highness. And your command?'

'At present fifty troopers at the blockhouses above Kofn Ford and along the river. In the winter, during the long dark nights, when there are many attempts to run illicit goods across the frontier, I shall have, perhaps, a score or so more.'

'And you are not tired of it?' M. Selpdorf raised his hands.

'So tired, your Excellency, that I am half inclined to let a better man step into my shoes.'

'But come, come, that is impossible!' returned his Excellency agreeably. 'Are you also tired of our capital, of Révonde?'

'I have had very little opportunity of growing tired of Révonde. I know nothing of it.'

'But you would prefer Révonde, believe me.'

At this moment an attendant appeared with a card upon a salver. Selpdorf read the name with the faintest contraction of his brows.

'You will excuse me, M. Rallywood,' he said; 'I must ask you to wait in the ante-room for a few minutes.'

The ante-room was a long pillared corridor, in which Rallywood found himself quite alone. He fell at once into speculations as to the meaning and aim of Selpdorf's late awakened interest in himself. Also the allusions to Counsellor had probably been made with calculated intention.

Rallywood understood that each of these two men

had the same end in view; each desired to dissemble his own character. And each of them succeeded with the many, but failed as between themselves. Selpdorf posed as the suave, sympathetic, good-natured friend of those with whom he came in contact; Counsellor, as a man of no account, a rugged soldier, honest, strong, outspoken, a good agent to act under the direction of more astute brains, but if left to his own resources somewhat blunt and blundering.

To do Rallywood justice, he was far more occupied with this last thought than with the things which bore more directly on his own prospects and future. At this period his life was comparatively tasteless and void of interest; there was nothing to look forward to, and the recent past meant extremes of heat and cold, long solitary rounds ridden by night, and days rendered so far alike by iron-handed rule and method that one was driven to mark the lapse of time by the seasons, not by the ordinary divisions of weeks and months.

As he lounged in a chair full of these thoughts a slight rustle, soft and silken, like the rustle of a woman's dress, caught his ear. He turned his head quickly. The corridor with its splendid pillars, which stood at long intervals, was steeped in the clear electric light, and from where he sat he could see that there was no person visible throughout its entire length.

Then as his gaze travelled back it rested on some-

thing which had certainly not been lying where he now saw it at the time of his entrance.

Not six paces behind him, stretched across the dark carpeting, in the very centre of the pillared vista, lay a woman's long glove.

A woman's glove possesses a peculiar charm for all men. Perhaps it suggests some of the sweet mystery of womanhood. The first action of most young men in Rallywood's place would have been to raise it at once and to examine it, as though in some impalpable manner it could tell something of its unknown wearer, who might turn out to be the Hathor, the one woman in the world.

But the circumstances of Rallywood's life, and perhaps also some exclusive element in his character, had heretofore set him rather apart from the influence of women. He had grown to regard them without curiosity, which is the last stage indifference can reach.

It must be admitted that it was with a feeling akin to repugnance that he at last lifted the long, soft, pale-hued, faintly-scented *suède* from the floor and dangled it at an unnecessary distance from his eyes, holding it as he did so daintily between finger and thumb. Its subtle appeal to his senses as a man failed to reach him. It simply aroused an old feeling of reserve toward the sex it represented. His face altered slightly and he dropped it suddenly with an odd repulsion, as he might have dropped a snake, on a couch near by.

Then he resumed his chair and turned his back upon it, till the reflection that the woman to whom it belonged must have come and gone while he sat thinking with his back to the corridor sent him wheeling round again.

The glove still lay where he had placed it on the edge of the couch, palm upwards and with a suggestion of helplessness and pleading. It annoyed him unreasonably. He frowned and looked at his watch. Half an hour had passed since Selpdorf dismissed him.

At that moment a gutteral voice broke the silence of the house, and the heavy curtain over the door at the nearer end of the ante-room was thrust back by a brusque hand, and a tall, high-shouldered, handsome man, dressed as if he were about to attend some Court function, stood in the opening. Behind him Rallywood caught sight of a flurried and explanatory lackey.

'Ah! so I have lost my way after all,' said this personage in a bland voice. 'A mistake! But I hope you will accord me your forgiveness, mademoiselle?'

Rallywood sprang to his feet at this most unexpected ending and looked round.

Close beside him stood a tall girl wrapped in a long cloak of fur and amber velvet. She was singularly beautiful, with a pale, clear-hued beauty. Her black, long-lashed eyes were on him and they were full of laughter.

'Enter, then, Baron,' said the girl, glancing across at the courtier. 'Did you guess you would find me here, or were you seeking monsieur?' and she waved her bare left hand towards Rallywood.

'I lost my way, nothing more,' returned the Baron, coming forward; but perhaps, as in my heart, all roads lead towards——' He bowed deeply once more, this time stooping to kiss the girl's hand with a certain show of restrained eagerness.

She drew back with a little impatient gesture.

'I should not have been here, but for an accident,' she replied coldly. 'In fact I was on the point of starting for his Highness's reception, had not monsieur detained me.' And, to Rallywood's amazement, she indicated himself.

Before he could speak she pointed to his spurred boot.

'Monsieur has set his heel on my poor glove,' she added.

By his hasty movement in rising he had apparently dislodged the glove from its position on the edge of the couch. He stooped with a hurried word of apology and picked it up. On the delicate palm was stamped the curved stain of his boot-heel.

'Do you always treat a lady's glove so?' she asked gravely, and held out her hand for it.

Rallywood looked down at her very deliberately, and something that was neither his will nor his reason decided the next action. He folded the soft *suède* reverently together.

'No, mademoiselle,' he answered, as he placed it inside his tunic, 'I have never before treated a lady's glove—so. For the accident, I offer my deepest apologies.'

She watched him with raised eyebrows and a slight derisive smile. Then she drew the companion glove from her right hand, and giving it to the lackey, who still remained in the background, she said—

'Throw it away, it is useless, and tell Nanzelle to bring me another pair.'

'Monsieur, with whom I have not yet the pleasure of being acquainted,' interrupted the Baron rather suddenly, 'monsieur is after all the lucky man. He retains what I dare not even ask for.'

'Shall I call back the servant with its fellow for you?' mademoiselle asked haughtily. 'It is nothing to me who picks up what I have thrown away.' With this rebuff to Rallywood she placed her hand upon the German's, as if to ask him to lead her from the room, and added—

'You wish for an introduction? Then allow me to present you to each other. His excellency the Baron von Elmur.' She paused, and her eyes dwelt for a moment on Rallywood's. 'A gentleman of the Guard.' And before Rallywood could explain the mistake the curtain had dropped behind them and he was left standing alone.

In Baron von Elmur he recognized the oblique carriage of the head and the high-shouldered figure

of the third man he had seen with the newspaper correspondents in the Grand Square that afternoon. Moreover he knew that the German had entered the ante-room through no mistake, but with some object in view. As for the girl, who was she and where had she come from? She was not of Maäsau, since she had introduced him as belonging to the Guard, for not only was every officer of that favoured corps individually known, but it was further impossible for a Maäsaun to make the slightest mistake with regard to any uniform. It was one of the boasts of the country that even a child could tell at a glance not only the special regiment, but the rank of the wearer of any uniform belonging to the Duchy.

Rallywood had no time just then to pursue the subject further, as he was almost immediately recalled to the Chancellor's presence.

'Now, monsieur,' began Selpdorf, as though no break had occurred in the conversation, 'you are in truth tired of keeping our dreary marches; is it not so?'

'There are better places—and worse, your Excellency.'

'Our gay little capital will be one of the better places, I promise you,' continued the Chancellor. 'A position in the Guard of his Highness has just become vacant. Am I right in believing that a nomination to that superb regiment would tempt you to remain with us?'

Rallywood for once was a little taken aback.

'A gentleman of the Guard.' He repeated the girl's words, of introduction mechanically; then, putting aside the thought of her, he took up the practical view of the situation and answered, 'I am an Englishman, your Excellency, and though I have taken the soldier's oath to the Maäsaun standard I have not taken the oath of nationality. I could not consent to become a naturalised citizen even of the Duchy of Maäsau.'

'Ah, so?' Selpdorf stroked his chin, then despatching the objection with a wave of his hand, he resumed, 'We must overlook that in your case. You have already served the Duke for five years with as sincere zeal as the truest Maäsaun amongst us. We must remember that and overlook a drawback which is far less important than it seems.

He turned to a memorandum on the table and consulted it.

'You were engaged in the affair at Xanthal, I see?'

'Three years ago, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood in a tone that implied his powers of usefulness had probably become impaired by lapse of time.

Selpdorf moved his shoulders. Here was a man throwing difficulties in the way of his own advancement. Yet he could not possibly be so indifferent to his own interests as he chose to assume.

'To be plain with you,' Selpdorf said with an air of candour, 'the younger officers of the Guard have little experience. The latest fashion in neckties or

the most charming dancer at the Folie absorbs their attention, to the exclusion of more important matters. There is, as you doubtless know, a certain admixture of French blood in the veins of our most noble families,' he finished abstractedly.

Rallywood had no remark to offer upon this. The officers of the Guard bore a very distinct reputation. They were said to be a very pleasant set of fellows socially, unless one ran foul of their prejudices, but they were credited with a good many prejudices. As for his personal acquaintance with them, it was limited to acting as second in a hastily arranged duel fought out in the yard behind a little country railway station.

'I should like to see a somewhat different spirit introduced, and to be assured that I could always rely on the presence of at least one cool-headed officer at the Palace. Your experience on the frontier has eminently fitted you for the position. To you, therefore will be allotted the quarters reserved in the Palace itself for the adjutant of the Guard. May I have the pleasure of saluting you as such?'

Rallywood hesitated. He foresaw certain difficulties, but they apppeared rather attractive than otherwise at the moment. He threw back his shoulders, a light of laughter came into his eyes, he raised his head and looked into Selpdorf's face.

'I thank your Excellency.'

The Chancellor understood more than met the ear. He approached the subject delicately.

'Then you will allow me to congratulate you, Captain Rallywood,' he said, bending forward to shake hands with his visitor in the English fashion. 'There may possibly be some trifling difficulties at the outset. The first step in any undertaking usually costs something, but you will not, I beg, permit yourself to be drawn into,—ahem, any shallow quarrels. Our friends of the Guard, you will understand, are a little prone to pick up even a careless word on the sword-point.'

M. Selpdorf paused, and referred once more to the memorandum.

'There has been some small hitch about the pay on the frontier of late?' he asked innocently.

'A serious hitch for the last eighteen months or so, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood with a smile that did not reach his eyes.

'Indeed? That must be remedied. The paymaster-General shall have a note upon your affair immediately, Captain Rallywood. Good-night.'

Rallywood stepped out into the windy, frozen night, and also out of his old life into the new. Above him the stars, written in their vast, vague characters upon the night-blue vault of sky, shone with a keen lustre. Below his feet, with scarce a break in the great circle, it seemed as if they drew together in denser clusters and set themselves in luminous tiers. These latter were the lights of the city. For the Hôtel du Chancelier stands high upon one of the twin ridges which form the ravine of the

river, and upon whose converging slopes Révonde is built. Rallywood stood and looked down upon the dip and rise of the terraced city with a new interest, for now it held a future for him individually, a future which must be stirring and might be something more.

The eyes of the girl whose glove he had trodden upon still challenged him from the starlit darkness, eyes made of starlit darkness themselves. He followed the broad black line of the river between its sweeping curves of lamps, broadening out seawards into hazy dimness. Then as a great bell across the water boomed out the hour he turned his gaze to the east, in the direction of the sound, to where the broken brightness of the crowding streets gave place to a majestic alignment of light and shadow, showing the position of the Ducal Palace upon the river bank. Behind and above it shone a blood-red gleam like an angry eye; this Rallywood knew to be the great stained dome of the historic mess-room of the Guard.

Then the late lieutenant of the Frontier Cavalry laughed aloud in the dark, his blood tingled in his veins, for the priceless element of a vague, unknown danger and excitement had entered into his life.

CHAPTER III.

THE GENTLEMEN OF THE GUARD.

MEMBERS of great families frequently regard themselves as submerged individualities. They wilfully sink all identity of their own in the traditions handed down to them, and live as mere representatives of a line which bears in common a noble name. This principle, which has something to recommend it, was adopted long ago into the system of the Guard of Maäsau, the officers of which were first gentlemen of the Guard and afterwards men in the private and ordinary sense of the term. There were eight of them—a colonel-in-chief, whose position became honorary after his elevation to that rank; a colonel, upon whom devolved the active command; a second in command, whose title of over-captain may be translated major; three captains, and as many subalterns. And every individual was drawn from the noblest blood of the country.

Thus it will be seen that Rallywood was about to enter the best company in Révonde.

On a lofty cliff above the gorge from which the Kofn issues to curve round the Palace gardens, and exposed to the four winds of heaven, stands an imposing square block of grey buildings. These con-

tain the permanent quarters of the Guard. One whole side of the courtyard within is taken up by the domed mess-room with its necessary adjuncts and offices.

Here on the day following Rallywood's interview with Selpdorf, three men lounged over their lunch. Any one of them, had he cared to take the regimental rolls from their brass-bound coffer in the ante-room, could have read his own name repeating itself down the columns as generation after generation lived through its identical life in the same surroundings, and died, most of them going to the devil with a fine inherited pride and even gracefully.

Nearly every man who had crossed the page of the Maäsaun annals had dined in that historic room, and each one of the men who now held the right to dine there had a hereditary interest, and in many cases a hereditary characteristic, to maintain. There was old walrus-faced Wallenloup; thin, dark, reckless Colendorp; Adiron, whose great bulk behind a cavalry sword was a sight for the gods, and so on; the three lieutenants following closely in the footsteps of the three lieutenants who had been before them; men who went to the rendezvous of a duel in all comfort, affecting to be infinitely more afraid of catching cold than of being killed; men who kissed the wife and dispatched the husband with equal skill and as little noise as might be; men who were feared by a rough, swaggering, raucous soldiery, whom they only knew through the hard-faced ser-

geants; men, in fact, who lived out their debonair, picturesquely evil lives to the satisfaction of themselves and of few others.

On this occasion Colonel Wallenloup, the commandant, was not present. Of him it was told that while still a lieutenant he had been offered, as a reward for services rendered to the Crown, the command of any Maäsaun regiment he might choose to select, and he had replied that he would rather be a lieutenant of the Guard than a field-marshal elsewhere. And so he remained to favour the mess with his somewhat blood-and-iron jokes. The mess-room was a spacious hall, and though only three men sat at table the place seemed full of life and colour from the black polished flooring to the carved and vaulted ceiling, from which hung in tattered folds the old banners of the regiment. Red hangings partially draped the dark walls, and over all the light from the stained dome fell in rich colour; while through the talk of the men ran the one weird sound that never ceased about those walls, the whimpering of the wind.

Suddenly the door opened, and a young man, small and thin, with a faint down upon his upper lip, entered quickly.

'Unziar has won!' he cried.

'Won what?' asked Adiron, the senior man present, as he poured out another glass of wine.

'Won his second match against Abenfeldt with seven to spare.'

Adiron stretched his legs and leant back; his figure was well adapted for leaning back.

'My good Adolph, explain yourself.'

'Hadn't you heard of it? Why, they arranged it last night at Countess Sagan's.'

'Abenfeldt fancies himself as a shot, but he forgot he had to do with Unziar,' laughed Captain Adiron.

'Abenfeldt bet that he could shoot more swallows in half an hour before breakfast than any man in Révonde. That was in September, you know, and Unziar took him up—with service revolvers—and shot fifteen, winning easily. Abenfeldt can't get over it, and challenged him to a shooting-match again last night. I say,' Adolph broke off, and his face altered; he thrust out a little foot and surveyed the spurred boot that covered it critically, 'I've just ridden back from Brale. That new charger of mine bolted down the hill by the paling. I went to see Insermann; they had not been able to move him, you know.'

'Well,' urged all three voices at once.

'Insermann's dead. He died last night at dinner time.'

The men's eyes shot for a second at Insermann's empty place, which he was never to occupy again.

'Ah, I told him that scooping pass of his was a mistake, commented Adiron. 'And the worst of it is that his death breaks the line of the Xanthal Insermanns. Poor old Insermann! he was the last of a good stock, and I, for one, don't like new blood.

What have you to say about that pass now, Colendorp? If I am not mistaken, you defended it?'

'Insermann was by three inches too tall,' replied the individual addressed. 'For a short man one would be hard put to it to discover a more useful—— Hullo!'

The folding doors had been flung open with a crash, and a man of fifty or thereabouts, dressed in the gorgeous green and gold of the Guard, strode in tempestuously. He was short and heavily built, with a weather-red face and a coarse, overhanging moustache, which gave him rather the expression of an angry walrus. So angry, indeed, was he that his words came volleying out inarticulately. In his hand he held a crumpled sheet of parchment.

The men rose as he took his place at the head of the table.

'Insermann's dead, and Selpdorf says——' The Colonel's choked ejaculations broke, his voice failed him, and he sent the paper fluttering from his hand across the silver and glass till little Adolf picked it up. In another moment Colonel Wallenloup was more coherent.

'I am afraid I must have walked up the hill rather too quickly,' he said apologetically, after draining a great goblet of beer. 'However, it is not to be denied that M. Selpdorf begins to take too much upon himself. The entire administration of the State is in his hands, and yet he is not satisfied with

that position! No, he aims even higher; he desires to nominate the officers of his Highness's Guard!'

Every man present had his own peculiarity. The Colonel's reputation would not have stood so high as it actually did but for his insensate temper. Perhaps the anecdote told of him that, when discussing the point of having been ruled out of action during certain army manœuvres he became so enraged that he pursued the umpire in question with a wooden tent hammer, had added more to his popularity than all his thirty odd years of service and his immense genius for fortification.

Some of the Continental armies are always marking time, and they do not prize the most the man who marks time best, but the man who can bring some humour or touch of romance into the dulness of routine, and they prefer the humour to be led up to by the winding road of eccentricity. It was never dull with the Guard. They possessed officers who kept their world on the move.

'Gentlemen,' said Wallenloup at length, when his last remark had been received with approval 'I have the honour to inform you that M. Selpdorf has seen fit to appoint, *vice* Captain Insermann, deceased, Lieutenant John Rallywood, of the Frontier Cavalry.'

A silence followed this announcement.

'Upon whose recommendation has M. Selpdorf taken this step? inquired Captain Colendorp gravely.

'Reasons of State—mere reasons of State. He had the audacity to tell me so.'

'I understood, sir, that you had other views?' said Adiron.

'Well, yes, we had virtually agreed upon our choice, I may say, gentlemen.'

'Certainly, sir. And you made that clear to the Chancellor?'

'I did so—perfectly clear. I told him in the most reasonable manner that we wanted no condemned rabble in the Maäsaun Guard! I told him that we had practically decided on Abenfeldt in case of a vacancy occurring. I even went so far as to remind him that there had been Abenfeldts among us for four centuries.'

'He couldn't meet that argument!' exclaimed Adiron.

'No, he parried it, gracefully enough, I admit. He reminded me in turn that there had been Selpdorfs also in the Guard, and swore that had he a son of his own to nominate he must still at this moment have given the preference to this Englishman. I left him to reconsider the matter, however, and rode home, to find *that* already waiting for me in my quarters,' and he pointed to the parchment in Adolf's hand.

Adolf looked up with a smile.

'He will not join immediately, sir, this Rallywood?' he said with his gentle lisp.

'Not for a week.'

'Then it doesn't really matter, you know,' added the young man.

Wallenloup's red-shot eyes gleamed upon him suddenly.

'As your commanding officer, sir, he said grimly, 'I don't understand your meaning, but——' and an odd smile flickered about the savage lips.

'As a private gentleman, Colonel——' put in Colendorp.

'As a private individual I understand your meaning very well. But if I were here as your colonel, Lieutenant Adolf, by Heaven, sir, not all the officers of the Guard, past or present'—he rose to his feet as he spoke, and grasping the hilt of his sword glared round upon them—'should dare to hint at insult to a comrade!' and he drove the blade home with a clatter into its scabbard and strode out of the room as he had come, like a thunderstorm.

The men waited in silence until the echo of his footsteps died away, and in the mind of each rose a vivid memory. It happened, from causes which might in the case of the Guard of Maäsau be called natural, that the three present lieutenants, viz. Unziar, Varanheim, and Adolf, had joined on the same day, and by way of supporting the traditions of their immediate predecessors each instantly agreed to challenge each of the others, the result of which would in all probability have been the speedy occurrence of three fresh vacancies in the list of officers.

Wallenloup heard of this and sent for the lieutenants, whom he considered too valuable to be thus easily lost.

'Gentlemen,' he began, 'I am about to enforce an old order that expressly forbids quarrels amongst the members of our corps. If you want to fight, fight some one else. There are plenty of men who stand badly in need of being killed. Turn your attention to them. But if any trouble should arise between any two of you, come to me. There has been enough of this kind of scandal about us lately, and therefore for the future we will do the thing quietly with a pack of cards, or, if you prefer it, with dice. The man who loses can—go. There is the river, or for choice, his own pistol. You understand me?'

Varanheim looked at Unziar and Unziar looked at Adolf, and they smiled.

'I think,' said little Adolf, 'we *might* find others to brawl with.'

'The river is abominably cold,' added Unziar.

'And the same dish is served for us all,' concluded Varanheim.

Wallenloup laughed.

'I have laid the alternative before you, gentlemen,' he said, 'the cards or the dice.'

This was the story that rose in the minds of the men round the mess table, and a minute later they joined in a simultaneous shout of laughter. Adiron's big face was flushed as he called for a special brand of champagne wherein to drink the Colonel's health.

'He's magnificent—the old man!' he said when he could speak. 'Let him alone. He's equal to any mortal occasion! He reminds me of the day when his Imperial Majesty over the border complimented him on the appearance of the Guard, saying he should feel proud to number us amongst the regiments of the German army. "And I can assure your Majesty that the feeling of admiration is entirely reciprocal," says the C. O. "We should be happy to incorporate your army in ours"!'

The men had heard the story often before, but it was greeted with all the relish of novelty, a quality which lives eternally in any anecdote that tells on one's own side.

Before the laughter had subsided another man entered the room. He was, perhaps, nearer thirty than twenty, and the face under his dull, colourless hair was singularly pale, but there was promise of great strength in the long angular body.

'My congratulations, Unziar.' Colendorp turned to the new-comer.

'Thanks. By the way, have you heard of Insermann? Gone out, they tell me.'

'Yes. And have you heard of the new appointment?'

'No. But it's Abenfeldt, of course. The Colonel as good as promised him last year.'

'Ever heard of Lieutenant Rallywood of the frontier?' demanded Colendorp in his slow way.

'Yes, I do happen to know him.' Unziar looked

round in some surprise. 'He was the frontier fellow who undertook to be my second at the station when I fought De Balsas because he insisted that our trains were inferior to those in Germany. Rallywood—you don't mean to say?' a slow comprehension dawning upon him. 'But it's impossible! The fellow's an Englishman. How could such a thing be possible? On the frontier, yes, but not in the Guard!'

Colendorp was a silent, reserved man, disliked by persons who met him casually in society, but to those who inhabited with him the quarters at the Palace he stood as the impersonation of the grim spirit of the Guard. He drew away from the table and crossed his legs.

'The idea has at length occurred to one man,' he with his glance on Unziar's pale face, 'to M. Selpdorf, in fact.'

Unziar looked back at his interlocutor, his eyes hardening.

'Of course,' he said, bringing out each word distinctly, 'Rallywood must be got rid of.'

'It will offend M. Selpdorf if his nominee be interfered with,' went on Colendorp.

'I have already undertaken that little matter, put in Adolf eagerly.

There was an undercurrent of meaning in all this of which each man present was fully aware. Unziar was presumed to have very strong private reasons to propitiate rather than to offend the power-

ful Minister. But this happened to be a typical instance in which the interests of the corps over-rode those of the individual. Moreover the custom of the Guard required the individual most concerned to prove his loyalty at such times.

Colendorp continued to gaze at Unziar.

'We are much obliged to you, Adolf,' he said courteously; 'but in compliment to his comrades I feel sure that Unziar will hardly wish to allow any other to undertake this special matter.'

Adolf would have spoken again, but Unziar stopped him.

'As a personal favour, Adolf, leave it to me,' he said.

Adiron, who had thus far taken no part in the discussion, now struck in.

'But remember, Unziar, that you must act with caution. For obvious reasons there must be no apparent design. The dispute, whatever it may turn upon, must appear to come about naturally. Above all, it must not take place here.'

'Precautions from Adiron!' remarked Colendorp with a thin smile. 'The affair becomes serious indeed!'

'We cannot afford to offend England while Elmur is at work in this country. She is at this moment our very good friend,' Adiron observed apologetically. 'There will be many public occasions—at the Palace ball, for example.'

'You may trust me to keep up appearances,' said

Unziar. 'Then it is understood that I arrange the affair of Captain Rallywood at the Palace ball if possible. The matter may safely be left in my hands.'

Once more the folding doors were thrown back, and between the crimson portieres appeared the face of Colonel Wallenloup, charged with a strange expression. He advanced a step or two into the room, then turned to introduce a man behind him.

'Captain Rallywood, gentlemen,' he said.

CHAPTER IV.

DANGER SIGNALS.

A WEEK later Rallywood returned from the frontier to take up his appointment in the Guard. Advised by a note from Wallenloup that his quarters were not yet in readiness for him at the Palace, he drove direct to the Continental on his arrival in Révonde.

Here presently Counsellor dropped in upon him. Rallywood was in his dressing-room, transforming himself as rapidly as possible into the likeness of an English gamekeeper; for a magnificent festivity in the shape of a masked ball was about to take place at the Palace. All the world had been invited, and as many of the world as could go were going, each with his or her own dream or purpose, as the case might be.

Major Counsellor sat and surveyed his friend, occasionally offering suggestions and remarks.

'Are you aware that the Guard of Maäsau never condescends to show itself in Révonde in any costume but its own blazing uniform? I see you have your edition of it lying on the chair over there. Why are you not conforming with their amiable peculiarities?'

Rallywood had his back to Counsellor at the moment.

'So I have heard, but I do not join until to-morrow,' he replied in an expressionless voice.

'And your quarters in the Palace? How about them?'

'I shall also have the rooms to-morrow.' Then he wheeled round and his eyes lit on his companion. 'Hullo! I didn't notice you before. Is that your notion of the gentle art of masquerade? What are you meant to be—a sort of Tommy Atkins?'

'I believed myself to be disguised as an officer and a gentleman,' returned Counsellor, rising to give Rallywood the full effect of his sturdy figure, clad in the uncompromising scarlet so dear to his country's heart. 'This is the uniform of the 30th Dragoons as worn in or about the year of grace 1730.'

'Your old regiment?'

Counsellor nodded. 'And my grandfather's,' adding, 'What's the matter with the dress?'

'Nothing,' said Rallywood, laughing. 'Perhaps I imagined on an occasion of this kind you might possibly stoop to something more misleading than this blatantly British get-up.'

'What were you expecting—a troubadour? I am satisfied to appear in my own character. Only a proportion of the people wear masks at this ball; it's an annual affair. Besides, life with a purpose is too wearing; one must always be on the alert and have the purpose in view, like the actor in a sixpenny

theatre, who plays up to the gallery and keeps his eye open for the rotten egg of his enemy. The egg may not be thrown, but he must be ready to dodge it all the same. And—I have never excelled in dodging.'

'Ah—just what the Chancellor thinks. He says he has an immense admiration for you as the most honest diplomatist in Europe.'

'He put himself to the trouble of mentioning that fact to you, did he? Then I shall take the precaution of insuring my life. Anything might happen to a man of whom he has so villainous an opinion.

Rallywood was arranging his gaiters.

'Why? You don't suppose Selpdorf is going to throw the egg? He spoke of you with absolute affection.'

'My good John, he has already thrown it! Now I must harass myself to find out the reason,' said Counsellor. 'You have spoilt my evening out. Before I had no purpose; now you have thrust one upon me. You should have kept your news until to-morrow.'

Rallywood was getting himself into his velveteen coat with a good deal of unnecessary violence.

'I don't believe the Chancellor is so dangerous,' he said carelessly. 'He is a consummate actor, but one knows it.'

'Yes,' assented the Major thoughtfully; 'yet the moment to watch him is the moment when he acts that he is acting. With the others of us acting is

troublesome; with him it is habitual and a pleasure. However, he has given you your company; the rank is substantial, as far as it goes, and at least the accompanying pay is not altogether visionary.'

'Yes, he's done all that.' Rallywood was flinging some of his belongings back into his portmanteau.

'The next thing will be to find you a mission.'

'He has done that also.' Rallywood raised an expressive face. 'I am to reform the Guard!'

Counsellor burst into a great laugh, but as suddenly grew grave.

'They will take it kindly! Their welcome to you is likely to be . . . interesting!'

'So I expected. But I went down to the mess last week and was introduced by old Wallenloup. They were very civil.'

'Ah! and since you left they have been very silent. They are overdoing it—too civil and too silent. Looks bad, you know.'

'Oh, that's all right; Selpdorf told me not to be drawn into any shallow quarrels,' Rallywood answered with a smile.

But the Major did not take up the smile. The two vertical lines above his fleshy nose deepened.

'It strikes me, my boy, that you've got the devil by the tail this time,' he said gruffly, as his eyes rested for a moment on Rallywood; 'but you know how to take care of yourself. Ready? We can drive to the Palace together. I have a carriage waiting.'

The couple proceeded downstairs, bought cigarettes of the waiter, and started. The wind was howling in its usual twanging cadences down the broad streets, increasing in force as they gained the open, lighted embankment of the river, along which they passed for some distance before reaching the courtyard of the Palace.

The great entrance hall was still full of arrivals, while up the wide central staircase trooped masks and dominos in a changing kaleidoscope of form and colour. Eager heads thrust this way and that, picturesque figures grouping and greeting, cavaliers of all periods, maidens of all nations, monks, barbarians, cardinals, queens, and clowns—sometimes the wisest heads under the most foolish caps—while here and there a few favoured paper-folk made desultory notes and sketches.

The painted ceiling stretching overhead is one of the triumphs of Renaissance art. The identity of the master hand who achieved that marvellous work has been a mooted point in art circles for a couple of centuries or thereabouts, and quite a library on the subject exists. The Maäsauns are very proud of their ceiling, prouder still of the controversy which has raged and still continues to rage around it.

M. Selpdorf, as representing his master, stood at the head of the staircase, and received the guests with a good deal more politeness and discrimination than the Duke himself might have shown, for that person-

age was said to have an awkward habit of turning his back upon those whom he happened to dislike.

Major Counsellor was greeted with effusion; Rallywood with raised eyebrows and a slight reserve.

'I had hoped to welcome the new captain of the Guard this evening,' Selpdorf said in a low voice and with a significant glance at Rallywood's velveteens.

'I have not yet joined, your Excellency. To-morrow I hope to have that honour,' returned Rallywood and passed on into the gallery beyond. This gallery, opening from the head of the staircase, ran round the great saloon, which served the purpose of a ballroom, and many of the guests were amusing themselves by looking down over the silk-hung balustrade on the dancers below.

In the gallery Counsellor paused to say a word here and there to several persons, who, like Rallywood and himself, were without masks, but he seemed to have curiously little facility in penetrating disguises. Presently a burly old man in the glittering green and gold of the Guard disengaged himself from the curtains at the back of the gallery, and nodding a supercilious acknowledgment of Rallywood's salute, brought his hand down with a rough heartiness on Counsellor's shoulder.

'Back again in Maäsau, Major Counsellor. I'm glad to see you!' he said with the laugh in his small eyes marred by a wrinkle of suspicious cunning, an

expression which seemed startling on what was at first sight a big, bluff, sensual face. 'What good wind has blown you back among us?'

'Thanks, my lord;' Counsellor turned with ready response. 'I am glad to find that some of my old friends, especially Count Sagan, have not forgotten me,' he said simply.

'We believed you had forgotten Maäsau.'

'Maäsau will not allow herself to be forgotten!' laughed Counsellor. 'She is a coquette, and demands consideration from all the world.'

Sagan's face changed.

'Yes, a coquette, who trifles with many admirers but who knows how to hold her own against them,' he replied significantly. 'Who is that?' he added, staring after Rallywood. 'I think I recognise him as an English lieutenant in the Frontier Cavalry.'

'He is the same to-day,' said Counsellor.

'What?' exclaimed Sagan. 'Why to-day? Has he, then, come in for one of your colossal fortunes?'

'Who can say?' returned Counsellor. 'A fortune or—a colossal misfortune. Ah! there is Madame Aspard. Au révoir, Count.

Counsellor passed on, perfectly well aware of the heavy meaning attached to the wilful ignoring of Rallywood's appointment to the Guard by its colonel-in-chief. There was certainly danger ahead.

CHAPTER V.

GOOD LUCK AND A FIREFLY.

MEANWHILE Rallywood had come to an anchor beside one of the high embossed doors of gold and white which led from the gallery into various luxurious withdrawing rooms. As he leant against the lintel a voice suddenly said in his ear, as it seemed—

'My dear lady, why have such scruples? They are the most detestable things in life and the least profitable. They poison pleasure even when they do not altogether deprive us of it. And what does one gain by them? Absolutely nothing, not so much as the good opinion of our friends, who can never be brought to believe we possess them,' said a man in a mocking tone.

A distinctly uncomfortable sensation pervaded Rallywood's mind for the second which preceded the reply. The voice was Baron von Elmur's, and there was a note of admiration in it that he had reason to be acquainted with.

A woman laughed, a light, provoking laugh, Rallywood, who was still held by the crush against the door, knew it well, but he breathed freely, for it was not the laugh he had feared to hear.

'Nevertheless, Baron, I like scruples; they are always respectable, and therefore of use—sometimes,' the lady answered in a high, sweet tone.

'Your husband, my Lord Sagan, has not found them indispensable in his career.'

'But he is not a woman!' with a sigh.

'A beautiful woman can dispense with everything except—her beauty! That makes fools of us all! Besides——'

The rest of the sentence was lost, as Rallywood managed at length to force his way through the crowd, which was thickening rapidly.

Then he came upon a group of men he knew, men from the frontier, from the marshes about Kofn Ford and the crags of Pulesco, men with tanned skins like his own, and the mark of the collar rim of their high military tunics round their throats. They were masked, and represented various original characters, and were enjoying themselves hugely. More than all were they astonished at being recognised so readily by Rallywood. Rallywood drew his finger round his throat by way of explanation. There was a general laugh, and the men scattered each to seek his own particular pleasure. Rallywood remained looking down on the dancers. There was in the back of his mind some desire to identify the lady whose glove was still in his possession. He fixed now on one tall domino, now on another, but without satisfaction. He was discontentedly coming to the point of knowing that he had made a fresh mistake,

when he turned his head abruptly, with a vague sense of being looked at, and saw a black domino standing for an instant alone at the further end of the gallery. Even under the muffling silken folds he fancied he recognised the attitude of the girl he had met at the Chancellor's.

He at once began to make his way through the crowd in her direction, but when next he looked she was gone. He descended to the salon, where he danced with more than one masked lady. His six feet of stature marked him out from the shorter Maäsauns, and the tall athletic figure of the game-keeper, who moved with so much of unexpected ease and grace, excited some attention.

After an interval, as he stood back against the wall to allow a couple who had been following him to pass, they drew up in front of him.

'I obey you, Mademoiselle,' said the man.

His companion, who wore a black domino, made a gesture of dismissal; then she turned to Rallywood. 'You have been looking for me?' she said, as her late partner moved away.

'But naturally, Mademoiselle,' replied Rallywood.

'You know who I am?'

'Not in the least. I cannot even make a guess, though I have been waiting to know since this day last week.'

'It would have been easy to ask the question—of anyone,' she said with an odd intonation.

'By no means. There are questions which cannot

be asked—of anyone, because the answer touches too closely.' Rallywood pulled himself up with a sudden sense of being ridiculously in earnest.

And then they were dancing.

'Yet you are not a stranger in Révonde. Madame de Sagan could have answered your question—had you cared to ask it,' the girl said.

'It did not strike me to ask her. I trusted to the fact that, belonging to the Guard, I must some day have the good fortune to find you again.'

'You are patient!'

'No,' returned Rallywood, 'I am not patient. But I know that all things come to him who waits. I wait.'

'So I see, excellently!'

'Have I not waited long enough to hear your name first from your own lips?'

'Stop for a moment;' then standing beside him, she continued, 'Ask me to-morrow.'

'If I am alive I will!' he laughed.

He felt her hand move with a quick tremor on his arm.

'I knew it! Which of them has challenged you? Unziar?' The swift question, echoing his own thought, took him completely by surprise.

He passed his arm round her, for the waltz was nearing its end.

'Shall we go on? No; no one has done me the honour of sending me a challenge.'

'Let us have an end of this absurd mystery!' said

the girl impatiently. 'I am Valerie Selpdorf, and you are——'

'John Rallywood of the Guard of Maäsau!' he interposed. 'I had my commission from you in the ante-room of the Hôtel du Chancelier. But for that I should have been more than half inclined to refuse it.'

'I wish you had refused it! It may cost you—more than a man cares to pay. I thought my father held the power to give any commission he pleased, but one can never reckon with the Guard. They mean to kill you, Captain Rallywood! I wanted to warn you, but I think you know more, perhaps, than I can tell you or than you will tell me. What is going to happen? I want to help you—you must let me help you!'

Rallywood laughed, but perhaps his arm drew her a little closer as they moved more slowly during the concluding bars of the waltz.

'My dear Mademoiselle, I assure you that your fears are quite groundless. I am proud to belong to the Guard of Maäsau, and they have so far shown no intention of rejecting me. As for duels, if there happened to be one—are not affairs common in Maäsau? And afterwards, fewer funerals take place than one would suppose likely! Besides, M. Selpdorf's wishes cannot be lightly disregarded in Révonde.'

'You will be drawn into a quarrel before the night

is over.' Mademoiselle Selpdorf stated her conviction very plainly, without noticing his disclaimers.

The music ceased. Rallywood spoke once more. 'To prove to you how little I anticipate anything of the sort, will you allow me to have the last dance on the programme?'

'That is nothing! What can I do for you?' she exclaimed.

'Expect me! If you would promise to expect me, I don't yet know the man who could stop my coming to you.'

The words were lightly spoken, but Valerie Selpdorf, looking up into Rallywood's eyes, understood that he was likely to be able to make any words of his good. They were handsome eyes, rather long in shape, frank and steady, the iris of a dense grey bordering on hazel as became the sunburnt yellow of his hair and moustache, and at that moment they contained an expression which remained in Valerie's memory as the distinctive expression of his face. Whenever in the future she recalled Rallywood, she thought of him as he looked then.

'I will expect you,' promised Valerie.

They both knew that for the moment they stood together at one of those cross-roads where life and death meet, where moreover a look and a word convey a mutual revelation of character such as years of ordinary intercourse often fail to supply.

Rallywood did not dance again; he contented himself with following the movements of the black

domino. After a time she joined a little group of people with whom she stood talking. One of the group presently detached himself and glanced round as if searching for some one. It was Unziar of the Guard. He quickly perceived Rallywood and at once came towards him.

'Allow me to recall myself to your memory, Captain Rallywood; I am Unziar of the Guard,' he said bowing, both voice and bow touching that extreme of punctiliousness which in itself constitutes an insolence.

'The Guard are said to have long memories. I hope in that particular, at least, if in no other, to support their traditions,' replied Rallywood, with an air of cool and serene indifference said to be impossible to any but men of his race.

'That is—something,' rejoined Unziar with a smile that belied its name. 'We are somewhat exigeant in the Guard. We ask for more than a long memory—a long pedigree, for example, and a long sword.'

'I have heard that also.'

Unziar glanced sharply at him out of his pale keen eyes. The fellow was too non-committal to please his taste. To hound a coward out of the corps promised infinitely less difficulty and enjoyment than he had hoped for when he pledged himself to rid the Guard of the Englishman. For perhaps the only time in his life he wished he wore any uniform but

the tell-tale green and gold, for he knew of the Guard that it was often their 'great name that conquered.'

Spurred by this thought he looked Rallywood very straightly in the face, and the gleam of his eyes reminded the Englishman of glacier ice.

'Knowing so many of our peculiarities, perhaps Captain Rallywood may no longer care to join us?' said the Guardsman.

Rallywood laughed with absolute good-humour.

'I both care and—dare!' he said pleasantly.

Unziar's face cleared.

'I am forgetting my errand,' he said with a slight change of tone. 'I have been sent by a lady to bring you to her. Will you follow me?'

As they approached the group, the shorter of the two black dominoes spoke.

'You need not trouble to introduce Captain Rallywood, Anthony. We are already friends; are we not, Monsieur?'

The sweet high voice and the inconsequent childish laugh came upon Rallywood with a slight shock.

'I could hardly have dared to claim so much,' he said; 'but I cannot forget that Madame de Sagan—'

She laid her hand with a suspicion of caressing familiarity on his arm.

'Hush, then! Do you not know that it is inadmissible to mention the name of a masked lady until the clock strikes midnight? Captain Rallywood has been stationed near the Castle at Kofn Ford; we have therefore met—occasionally,' con-

tinued the lady, addressing herself to Mademoiselle Selpdorf.

'Captain Rallywood is luckier than most of us,' interposed another voice. 'He seems to have an enviable facility for appearing where we others in vain wish to be. Only last week——'

A tall Mephistopheles in scarlet silk, whose high shoulders lent him added height, had joined them. His peaked cap and feather sparkled with lurid points of fire. Countess Sagan turned upon him.

'But, Baron, where is then your domino? It is not yet midnight,' she exclaimed, her hand still remaining on Rallywood's arm.

'Listen!' von Elmur raised his hand. 'The happy moment arrives when the beautiful faces we long to see——' He gave the rest of the sentence to the ear of Mademoiselle Selpdorf, who stood silently looking on at the little scene.

At this instant the music broke off with a sudden clang; the dancers paused where they stood, as the great bell of the palace tower sent its strong, mellow boom of midnight out over the frost-bound city.

Rallywood, on looking round an instant later, saw that masks and dominoes had disappeared. Opposite to him stood Valerie Selpdorf in a dress of some deep velvety shade, which bore, wrought upon its texture here and there, tiny horseshoes embossed in iridescent jewels. A diadem of the same shape crowned her dark hair. Yet all the richness and delicacy of the blended colourings struck Rallywood

with only one odd remembrance—his own boot-heel outlined in Révonde mud upon a long *suède* glove. The same association apparently occurred to Baron von Elmur. His glance fled from Valerie to Rallywood, and he smiled with some malice.

'What have we here, Mademoiselle? The stamp of some idealised cavalry charger?' he asked. 'I should be eternally grateful if only I were—of the cavalry!'

A sudden intense expression, like a spasm of hope or happiness, crossed Unziar's pale face in a flash. A word sprang almost involuntarily from his lips.

'The Guard——' But the girl cut him remorselessly short.

'I do not idealise either the Guard'—she paused, then went on without taking her eyes from Elmur's face—'or the cavalry. One has illusions, doubtless, but none so entirely absurd! I have idealised my own desire merely. I want good luck. I am "Good Luck!" ' She spoke the last two words in English, smiling back at Elmur.

The Baron bowed. He was not beaten yet.

'That is well,' he exclaimed; 'since the cavalry and Guard are disowned, it means that the good luck is for the poor diplomat!'

'Provisionally, yes,' said the girl.

'Mademoiselle Selpdorf has already given this waltz to me,' said Unziar, stepping forward.

But Mademoiselle Selpdorf placed her hand within the Baron's ready arm.

'Later, Anthony,' she answered. 'His Excellency deserves a consolation prize, since my reading of "Good Luck" is not in the German language.'

She turned away, and with her the group parted and scattered.

'You are very much interested; is it not so?'

Rallywood started. The Countess spoke petulantly.

'Do you not know,' she added, 'that the custom in Révonde holds you to the partner with whom you find yourself when midnight rings? Valerie Selpdorf is embarrassed with partners—my cousin Anthony Unziar, who desires perhaps herself, but most certainly her fortune, and our delightful German Minister, who uses all means that come to hand to win Maäsau for his master! But I should not say these foolish things to you, who are of the other party.'

They were dancing by this time, her head near his shoulder, her voice soft in his bending ear.

'Of the other party?' he repeated. 'I flattered myself that you said something else just now.'

'Yes, a friend; but I made a mistake—I have none—no, not one true friend!' the voice said passionately in his ear, 'and my husband——'

Rallywood almost lifted her clear of some crowding couples, and then gently released her. In a vague way he felt the force of her appealing beauty as he had felt it intermittently for some months past. It touched him for the moment, but he was apt to

forget both it and the very existence of the woman herself directly he parted from her.

'Count Sagan is colonel-in-chief of the Guard?' he asked, and the question seemed to fit in with her train of thought.

She made no immediate response, but with a light touch on his arm led him to a flower-banked apartment, about which a few couples were scattered in various convenient nooks. She sank upon a sequestered settee, and made room for him beside her.

'Yes, he is colonel-in-chief of the Guard because they think him too old to act any longer as its real commandant. He was the first soldier in Maäsau and the most unequalled sportsman. He was all these things, and I am proud of them! But look at me!'

She rose languidly and stood before him. Rallywood saw a slight woman, tall and exquisitely fair, who carried her small head with its gleaming coronet royally. Her skin and her soft flushed cheeks had the pure, evanescent quality of a child's complexion. Moreover, her chief charm was perhaps her air of child-like innocence. Isolde of Sagan had seldom looked more lovely; she was honestly touched by self-pity, and was posing as the proud yet disillusioned wife of a man hopelessly older than herself, and for the time being she believed earnestly in that view of her lot.

'All these things have been,' she added softly, her eyes filling with tears, 'but *I am!* Can I ever be

satisfied with what only was?' Rallywood's face altered. Like any other man in such a position he felt immensely sorry for her. She saw the advantage she had gained, and at once the coquette awoke in her.

'Captain Rallywood,' she sank down beside him again, 'I need a friend in whom I can trust, who will ask nothing of me, but who will give me all the things I most want.'

The interpretation of this enigmatical speech was left to the ear, for the young Countess was gazing at her big black fan, where luminous fireflies hung tangled amongst the dusky feathers. Quickly with some dissatisfaction she became aware that Rallywood was not looking at her—as he should have been doing—but staring in front of him with a grave expression. Well, she knew she could make him look at her as she desired—yet. It was but a matter of time.

'I think you may count upon me,' said Rallywood at last. He believed in her, which was good; moreover, he meant what he said; yet the speech was wholly lacking in the flavour which to the Countess Sagan was the flavour of life.

'After all, it is little to promise, and I may not need your friendship for very long,' she replied, plucking a glittering firefly from her fan and laying it on his sleeve with her sweet light laugh. 'Like a firefly I shall dance out my short night, and die quickly before life grows stale!'

Rallywood took out his cigarette case of Alfaun leather-work, and dropped the firefly with its sparkle of diamond-dust into it.

'I don't like to hear you say that,' he said in his quiet way, which the listener decided might mean so much or so little. 'We must all go out some time, I suppose, but one always wants the beautiful things to live for ever. . . . Meanwhile, can you spare me another dance?'

CHAPTER VI.

THE CLOISTER OF ST. ANTHONY.

THE night was drawing to a close. The long supper room was almost deserted. Amongst the lingerers were a few officers in the uniform of the Guard, who stood talking together in one corner.

'The fellow has given you no chance,' Adolf was saying gloomily.

'Have him in here! Kick him in here, if necessary!' said Colendorp.

'I don't think you will find him reluctant, drawled Unziar. 'I have spoken with him already this evening, and I—ah—rather liked what he said.'

'Then why haven't you arranged it? To-morrow he joins—and he must never be permitted to join the Guard! We might have asked Abenfeldt to remove him, but the Guard has up to the present day been able to set its own house in order,' added Colendorp with a sour glance at Unziar. 'Has his Excellency the Chancellor thrown out too powerful a hint about the fellow?—I saw Mademoiselle dancing with him this evening—I mean a hint too powerful to be disregarded by those who wish to retain the good opinion of M. Selpdorf!'

Unziar scowled.

'I permit no one—not one of my own regiment—to insult me,' he rejoined with a white blaze of anger on his pale face, and the wine in his hand trembled.

Adolf suddenly stretched across to take up a decanter, and catching the glass with the edge of his heavy epaulet, knocked it from Unziar's fingers.

'We are losing sight of the main question,' he said. 'May I suggest, sir,' to Colendorp, who happened to be the captain of his own squadron, 'that it is unusual to be obliged to act so carefully as we have been advised to do in this case?'

Colendorp's dark face grew darker, but the honour of the Guard over-rode all personal considerations.

'I have been hasty, Unziar,' he said in a stifled voice after a slight pause.

Unziar bowed and continued as if the interlude with its covert allusions had not taken place.

'It has been difficult to get at Rallywood this evening. Yet let us see how he shoots before we conclude that he has any rooted objection to handling a pistol. I agree with Captain Colendorp, that the affair should be brought off to-night. I will go and find the Englishman.'

He had already walked towards the broad arched doorway, when among the palms and the hangings which shrouded it two men appeared. One was Counsellor, in his blazing red uniform, beside him Rallywood's tall figure, clad in soft brown tones of velveteen, looked almost black.

Behind them again appeared other faces.

Rallywood took in the meaning of the situation at a glance. Without any perceptible pause he held out his hand to Counsellor.

'Well, good-bye, Major, since you are going. I will turn up to-morrow as early as I can,' he said.

Counsellor understood also. In his position it was impossible to do anything for Rallywood. As an agent secretly accredited by the Court of St. James's, he must hold aloof and neutral in all personal quarrels. He appreciated the tact with which Rallywood dismissed him from a scene which promised to be distinctly awkward, but his hand itched to shoot down the flower of the Guard of Maäsau for the insolence that dared to doubt the worthiness of an Englishman of birth to hold a place among them.

'Good-bye, Rallywood,' he said gruffly, and turned on his heel to find himself face to face with Baron von Elmur and one or two officers of the Frontier Cavalry.

'There is about to be a storm, Major, observed Elmur, passing Counsellor with a cool nod.

'So it seems. A storm in a teacup!' retorted the Major derisively.

Meanwhile Rallywood, with the men of the Cavalry, his old brother-officers, behind him, advanced to meet Unziar.

'We of the Guard are hoping to break glasses with you gentlemen of the Cavalry before the night is over,' began Unziar, alluding to a fashion amongst the military contingent in Maäsau of taking wine

together and breaking the glasses afterwards as a sign of unalterable good feeling and mutual loyalty. Unziar included Rallywood with the two officers beside him in this invitation, by a slight inclination of the head.

The three men accepted, but there was a little stiffening in the attitude of each, for Rallywood had friends here who were resolved, if only for the honour of the Frontier Corps, to see their late comrade through the coming trouble.

Before the wine filled the glasses, Adolf was already deep in the story of Unziar's shooting-match with Abenfeldt.

'Allow me the honour of drinking with you, Monsieur,' said Colendorp to Rallywood. 'It was in truth a notable performance; we have never had even in the Guard a surer shot than Unziar,' he added, alluding to the anecdote.

Rallywood had just time to make up his mind and determine upon his course of action.

The glasses clinked together, and then clashed upon the floor, where the men set their heels upon them. Then Rallywood turned to Unziar:

'I compliment you, Lieutenant Unziar,' he said. 'I already knew that you were a swordsman not easily to be matched; since, in fact, the little affair at Alfau, when I had the pleasure of acting as your second. But the pistol is, I venture to say, another matter.'

Unziar set his shoulders back with an indescribable suggestion of scornful defiance.

'May I ask you to state precisely what you mean, Monsieur?' he answered.

'I mean that although a man may shoot any number of swallows of a morning before breakfast, it does not follow that he can hit a man at, say, twenty paces.' Rallywood spoke deliberately.

The whole group of men listened in silence. Then Unziar leant towards Rallywood with a smile.

'We can but try, Captain Rallywood,' he said gently.

Although everyone in their immediate neighbourhood was listening, from the other side of the hall they looked, no doubt, like a group of tall men engaged in the ordinary conversation and common amenities of society, the only noticeable difference being that Unziar was a little more deprecating and low-voiced than usual. Elmur, standing near by, filled his glass and drank, with a silent nod at Unziar.

'I shall be delighted to assist you in settling the question,' returned Rallywood; then, consulting his card, he added, 'I find I have an engagement for the last dance, some twenty minutes hence. May I recommend the interval to your consideration?'

The two frontier men stepped forward simultaneously to offer their services to Rallywood. He thanked them, and was about to accept, when Captain Adiron interposed.

'If either of these gentlemen will resign in my

favour I shall feel it an obligation, as I can then offer myself to Captain Rallywood as one of his seconds.'

Courtesy demanded that Rallywood and his friends should fall in with this proposal, and Rallywood, replying to Adiron, added:

'You have heard exactly what passed between Lieutenant Unziar and myself, and I am sure I cannot do better than leave the matter in your hands in conjunction with my friend, Colonel Jenard.'

Colendorp and Adolf, as representing Unziar, accompanied Rallywood's seconds to make the necessary arrangements. Meanwhile, Rallywood strolled back to the gallery above the ballroom, and looked down at the dancers. He could not see Valerie, but he remembered Selpdorf and his injunctions to avoid a quarrel, and smiled as he thought over the words, since the Chancellor must have been perfectly aware that he had pushed an unwelcome foreigner into a position that could only be held by force of arms, even in the case of a Maäsaun candidate of noble blood. At that moment he saw his own position clearly. He knew himself to be an unconsidered unit in the big game of diplomacy that was being played over his head, and he remembered that the day of human sacrifices is not yet, as many suppose, quite a thing of the past. The gods are changed, or called by other names, and the high priest no longer dips his hands in the actual blood of the victim; but the whole deadly drama goes on repeating itself as it always must while the generations of men have

their being under various modifications of the primeval system of the strong hand. That his life might be deliberately requisitioned by Selpdorf to forward some secret policy of his own was by no means an impossible supposition. Rallywood glanced at the clock. In another quarter of an hour he must either be dancing with Valerie Selpdorf or lying dead in the famous Cloister of St. Anthony, which overlooked the river, and where many another man had died under much the same circumstances.

Rallywood laughed again and turned on his heel. At that period it did not seem to matter greatly which way it ended, but he was going to carry the undertaking through with what credit his wits afforded him.

In the meantime the Cloister of St. Anthony had been lit up from end to end with a brilliant light, and while the other two seconds went to fetch their respective principals to the spot, Adiron and Adolf exchanged a word or two as they waited.

'The Englishman took it very well,' remarked Adiron.

'Devilish well,' lisped little Adolf; 'he made rather a favour, of it just to satisfy Unziar, you know! He's too sure of himself, this Rallywood. If he kills Unziar, which is unlikely, I shall have to finish the affair myself!' with a frowning importance that sent Adiron into one of his ready roars of laughter.

The Cloister was still echoing with the sound when Rallywood, accompanied by Jenard, arrived from the

other side of the palace, where the state rooms were situated. On the way Jenard explained to Rallywood that the procedure decided upon as being best suited to the requirements of the case was simply alternate shots at twenty paces.

Rallywood and Unziar being placed, one of the men sent a coin spinning up into the air. Then followed a long minute of silence.

St. Anthony's Cloister looks inward towards a quadrangle; the outer side bordering the river has been glazed in, but in the interval of waiting Rallywood could hear the water plashing and sobbing against the foundations of the old walls, and the wild sound of the *tsa,* sweeping down from the snowy frontier above Kofn Ford, as it wailed and howled drearily along the dark waters. He almost started when Adiron, approaching him, said:

'You have won the first shot, Captain Rallywood.'

'Then I am afraid I must beg of you to do me the great favour of rearranging the affair,' replied Rallywood; 'for if I should be unfortunate enough to kill Lieutenant Unziar, or even to disable him, the question at issue between us must remain undecided for at the best an indefinite time, and possibly for ever. If you recollect, the matter over which he was pleased to differ with me was my expressed opinion that though a good shot may bring down swallows to perfection, he might miss a man at a moderate distance.'

'You have won the toss,' remonstrated Adiron.

'Yes, unluckily. But I feel sure that Lieutenant

Unziar will be kind enough not to hold me to that, since it is evident that the first shot should be his.'

Adiron grinned. It was his way of showing many mixed emotions.

'I like your way of conducting a dispute, Captain Rallywood,' he said; 'but as your second I must warn you that it is the worst luck in the world to refuse luck. You have won the toss. In declining to profit by it you are paying court to death.'

Rallywood shrugged his shoulders.

'I may prove my point,' he retorted, smiling.

'As for that, it might be decided on a different basis later on,' urged Adiron.

For the second time that night Rallywood looked at his watch.

'I have an engagement in seven minutes,' he said. 'I shall be glad if you will convey my meaning to Lieutenant Unziar.'

'As you like,' said Adiron; 'but in case of accident I should like to take the opportunity of saying to you now, that in the whole range of my experience I have never derived more pleasure from the attitude of a principal than I have on this occasion from yours.'

Adiron concluded with a bow and recrossed to the other second. Since the Englishman was determined to go to his grave in so excellent and gallant a fashion, by heaven, it was Victor St. Just Adiron who would escort him to its brink with all the honours of a fine and hereditary courtesy! He

was a man quite capable of losing himself in a cause; therefore, as he approached the other seconds, he came as a partisan of Rallywood's, resolved that his man should have his will in spite of all or any opposition.

'My principal,' he began, 'has just pointed out that this meeting is rather in the nature of the justification of an opinion than a quarrel in the ordinary sense;' then, repeating Rallywood's contention, he added, 'You will see that it remains for Lieutenant Unziar to prove himself in the right.'

Colendorp threw out a bitter oath, Adolf objected softly, and Jenard stood silent and in dismay. What could Rallywood mean by throwing away his life? But Adiron backed up Rallywood; he was going to bring this thing to pass! Rallywood should have a last satisfaction in this life, because he was worthy of it.

'If Lieutenant Unziar chooses to withdraw his opinion,' he said, 'of course Captain Rallywood will not go any further into the matter. For the rest, he has an appointment in less than seven minutes. On his behalf I can but insist that his suggestion affords the only possible way out of the difficulty.'

Reluctantly the other men yielded. Rallywood had gained a moral advantage. If he were destined to die, he would die in a manner that would go down into the history of the Guard. Hastily and in accordance with the request of Rallywood, the change of procedure was explained to Unziar.

The two opponents stood absolutely still, Rallywood's face wearing the expression of one who is politely interested in something that is happening to somebody else.

At the signal Unziar raised his pistol and fired.

Rallywood stood in his place for some thirty seconds, while there was a sound of splintering glass as the bullet rushed out into the darkness above the river; then he advanced smiling.

'It seems,' he said, 'that I was right.'

Unziar stared at him.

Rallywood handed his pistol to Jenard, and bowing to the assembled men ceremoniously, he went on:

'I hope we may consider the affair concluded, and as I am engaged for the dance that is about to begin, I trust you will excuse me.'

And with another bow he was gone. No one spoke for a little while, then Unziar walked towards the others with no very pleasant face. That Rallywood had done a thing above reproach, and in a manner above reproach, made it none the easier for his pride to accept the result. But he was above all considerations and before all considerations true to himself—to Anthony Unziar.

'Captain Rallywood has made his point and a reputation,' he said at last. 'I think, Colendorp, you will agree with me that as men of honour we must consider the matter ended.'

'And in Captain Rallywood's favour?' asked Colendorp suddenly.

'Certainly. What do you say, gentlemen?' Adiron spoke with warmth.

'I suppose we must concede that it was neatly done, and that Captain Rallywood deserves his success,' agreed Adolf with some constraint.

Unziar's generosity rose to the occasion.

'Our gain in the Guard is your loss in the Cavalry, Colonel Jenard,' he said handsomely.

Jenard acknowledged the implied compliment, and went off leaving the three Guardsmen together.

'We shall have to swallow the Englishman after all,' said Colendorp blackly. 'How came you to miss him, Unziar?'

Unziar raised his eyebrows.

'Who can tell? Luck, I suppose,' replied he. 'But I, for one, am not sorry. The man's worth keeping.

'He shapes well,' commented Adolf. 'But how will the chief take it?'

'I am going to find the Colonel and tell him what has happened,' said Unziar. 'I don't know how you fellows feel about it, but I say for myself that the Guard might have done a good deal worse.'

Colonel Wallenloup was at that moment engaged in promenading the ballroom with Valerie Selpdorf on his arm. She belonged to that sufficiently rare type of girl whose society is sought and enjoyed by those older men who, as a rule, are content to stand by and watch the current of younger life sweep by them, men who are in no sense gallants, but who find

a strong attraction in talking to a young and clever woman on all kinds of subjects that too often lie outside the domain of the thoughts of youth. Youth, engrossed in the problem of self, persistently ignores those far more varied and profound problems to be found hidden in more experienced hearts and lives.

Wallenloup, who distrusted all women and was accordingly disliked by not a few, always claimed a waltz with Valerie whenever he had the good fortune to meet her. To him she was a woman worth talking to first, and a pretty girl afterwards.

Their dance having concluded, Wallenloup walked down the room with his partner, continuing his monologue. Valerie had been very silent, but the Colonel had more to say than usual, and his subject happened to be a very scathing condemnation of outside interference with the affairs of the Guard. Valerie listened without words. Perhaps her heart beat more quickly, and there may have been more anxiety in her mind as to the final upshot of the case in point than her companion could have guessed. But she showed a flattering amount of interest in his opinion, although she was well aware that the question was probably being settled once for all, as far as Rallywood was concerned, in St. Anthony's Cloister, without the help of Colonel Wallenloup.

Suddenly she leant a little more heavily on his arm.

'My dear Mademoiselle, what is the matter?' exclaimed the Colonel. 'You are pale. What is it?'

'I am tired, and the saloon has become so hot, but

—thanks, I see my next partner coming,' she answered as Rallywood came towards them.

Wallenloup looked down at her with some reproach.

'This fellow?' he said.

'But why not?' she replied with a little smile. 'Is he not one of the Guard? Can I aspire to anything higher.

'Captain Rallywood is not yet of the Guard!' said the old soldier; then he bowed coldly and turned on his heel, without giving any symptom of having recognized Rallywood beyond his scornful words.

'I have come, Mademoiselle,' said Rallywood.

The girl's pale cheeks were now touched with a delicate carmine, such as shines between the fingers of a hand held up against a light. The flush seemed to heighten and enhance her beauty, or rather it lent her a novel kindling charm that struck home upon Rallywood's mood.

'What have you been doing?' she asked with interest.

'Breaking glasses with the Guard,' he replied.

'That ceremony occasionally includes the use of a sword or a pistol.'

'I have used neither,' he replied.

'Are you then also a diplomatist?' she asked with quick scorn.

Rallywood pulled his moustache. He did not pretend to understand women, but that Mademoiselle Selpdorf should now despise him for escaping a dan-

ger she had half an hour ago trembled over and prayed to avert, seemed at best rather inconsistent.

'I have attempted to be diplomatic now and then, perhaps,' he said, 'but not always with conspicuous success.'

'Diplomacy was never meant,' she said, looking frowningly at him through her black lashes, 'never meant to be a private virtue. Its only excuse lies in a national necessity.'

'M. Selpdorf instructed me to avoid a quarrel,' rejoined Rallywood.

'What do you suppose he meant,' she asked bitterly, 'knowing you had to deal with the Guard?'

'Ah!' and a slow smile dawned in his eyes; 'now I wonder what he meant knowing I had to deal with the Guard?'

Valerie frowned again; her words were not particularly expedient under the circumstances, but she disliked having them flung back at her.

'I beg your pardon. Of course I know nothing of—of these things. The matter concerns you only. But I thought, and I am sorry for the mistake, that you looked like a man!'

There was a jingle of spurs behind her as she was about to turn away, and Colonel Wallenloup strode up hurriedly.

'Captain Rallywood, why are you not wearing the uniform of your regiment—of the Guard?' he asked in a loud tone.

There was a stir amongst the people about them; many stopped and drew nearer to hear the end of this unprecedented conversation.

'Because I intend to resign my commission to-morrow, sir,' replied Rallywood haughtily.

'On the part of the Guard, I beg of you to reconsider that decision,' urged Wallenloup.

He shook hands gravely with the young man, then detaching a star of gun-metal from his breast, he awkwardly attempted to fasten it to the lapel of Rallywood's coat. 'I see you have not the star of the Guard. May I give you mine? Unziar, see to this; I cannot attach it.'

'No, Colonel Wallenloup; that should rather be my duty,' said the Countess Sagan, who happened to be standing by.

Wallenloup grunted.

'As the wife of our colonel-in-chief, madame, I feel sure your kindness will be appreciated,' he said grimly.

Madame de Sagan's blue eyes glanced up into Rallywood's face as her fingers touched his breast.

'No, as your friend,' she said softly.

Then all at once Rallywood discovered how numerous were his friends and well-wishers in Maäsau. He was overwhelmed with congratulations and introductions, but the memory of that night which lingered longest with him was the tall figure of Valerie Selpdorf standing aside and looking coldly

on. She expressed no pleasure at the turn events had taken, she offered no congratulations, but she met Unziar with what was only too plainly a mocking comment on the little scene, and the next moment was floating down the long room in the young Maäsaun's arms to the music of the last waltz.

CHAPTER VII.

ONE WOMAN'S DIPLOMACY.

THERE are men who though conspicuously in the world are never of it. Counsellor was one of these. He gave the impression of being a spectator; one who looked on at the play of common ambitions and intrigues with an amused and impersonal interest. He was drawn into no quarrels. Those who hated him most continued to shake hands with him, and none could accuse him of being a partisan. Yet he was rather truculent than meek, entirely ready to give his opinion, often with a surprising frankness, but maintaining throughout the complex relations of his life a superb reserve that formed a defence behind which neither favour nor enmity could penetrate.

He stayed on at Révonde, though the *tsa* continued to blow relentlessly. Affairs were yet in a chaotic condition and he lingered grumblingly at the club, declaring it was too cold to travel, and apparently finding his chief relaxation in privately deriding Rallywood for the favours which Révonde society was thrusting so lavishly upon him.

In the untiring whirl and tangle of court life and gaiety Rallywood lived and moved with a growing enjoyment that half surprised himself, and for which

he accounted on the score of change from the dull drudgery of the frontier. His acceptance by the Guard had been thorough; even the colonel-in-chief, Count Sagan, whose strongest point was not courtesy, had given him a pronounced recognition. The pretty Countess demanded a good deal of his attention and attendance, and this fact brought down upon him some of Counsellor's most scathing jeers.

'Gallantries are in vogue, my boy, and you are qualifying for a high place amongst the Maäsauns, he said. 'She is a deuced pretty woman. I offer you my compliments.'

'She is pretty,' replied Rallywood, 'but there are a good many people in Maäsau who think her handsomer than I do.'

'Yet you tell me that you are again on your way to her house this evening. Can't you get through the day without a glimpse of her?'

'Does it seem so bad as all that?" asked Rallywood reflectively. 'Yes, I suppose I like going there; yet as I have said before, there are a good many people who appreciate her more than I do.'

'Then what in the world takes you there?'

An odd expression grew slowly into the young man's face.

'Because of the other people, I suppose,' he repeated dreamily.

'As for instance?'

Rallywood woke up from his thoughts and shook himself.

'Unziar,' he returned with a grin.

Counsellor opened the stove and threw in the remnant of his cigar.

'Ah!' he commented significantly; 'and I presume Unziar goes there to meet you. I begin to see.'

Rallywood laughed.

'I'm hanged if I do! By the way, the Countess wants of all things to make a friend of you. She says the English are so reliable. But you are such an old bear the women can't get at you.

'So much the better for me,' was the grim reply. 'Also I am sorry that I can't reciprocate the Countess's opinion of me. There are very few reliable women. If I had ever found one I might have married her.'

'That is a hard saying, Major. You've been unlucky. That's where it hurts with you!"

'No, I've no personal feeling in the matter. I share the opinion in common with many wise men. Let me refer you to Solomon, the census of whose harem warrants us in believing that what he didn't know about women wasn't worth knowing. Yet he records as his experience, "One man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all these have I not found." '

'I bet he didn't! You can't sample a delicate quality in the bulk,' retorted Rallywood, and was already at the door when an idea stopped him. 'Look here, Major; come with me and revise your verdict.'

To his surprise Counsellor stood up and asked one more question.

'Countess Isolde invited me?'

'Any number of times, as you know.'

'The more fool she,' growled Counsellor; 'I'll go.'

The cotillon, danced with its hundred absurdities, was as fashionable at Révonde as elsewhere. Counsellor, like a courtly bear, was induced to join in its whimsical vagaries.

The details of the cotillon obtaining at that period do not concern us here. It is sufficient to say that, as a result of some evolution, by chance or by choice Counsellor found himself with the Countess on a raised daïs at one end of the room, while Mademoiselle Selpdorf and Rallywood formed the corresponding couple at the other end. Between them the dance proceeded, thus leaving the respective couples virtually isolated for a few minutes.

'It was delightful of you to come to our little party to-night,' the Countess was saying to her companion. 'Now that you have come to see me here, can I not induce you to come also to Sagan next week? We are going out there for a few days. Do think of it.'

'You are too kind, my dear madame, but an old man like myself may be out of place.'

The Countess sighed a little.

Of course you are not at all old,' she said, shaking her head at him, 'though you are fond of playing the part. But if you want to be old you can be old

in good company at the Castle, for the Duke will be there—you know he is a cousin of ours.'

Counsellor looked back into the smiling blue eyes. Most men would have succumbed to their innocent flattery. To the Major they only suggested an infinite capacity for foolishness.

'Don't you think we could exchange our Duke for another, a more interesting one?' she added, misled perhaps by his look. 'Duke Gustave is so wrapped up in his stupid gambling, and altogether there are many things——' her speech tailed off inconsequently into a confused silence.

'Wanting? Certainly! For example, we have no Duchess,' said Counsellor gallantly. 'We need a pretty Duchess. But is it not possible that Maäsau may yet boast the most adorable Duchess in Europe?'

Countess Isolde started and flushed like a pleased child, and her eyes lit up as she laid her fan on Counsellor's stout knee with a confidential impulsive gesture.

'But England does not like the idea of pretty Duchesses?' she ventured reproachfully. 'And you are only a flatterer after all!'

The Major raised his bushy white eyebrows.

'Have I that reputation?'

'No, they say you are terribly frank;' then a design to sound this difficult and usually unapproachable diplomat came into her irrational head. Older men than he had been vanquished by her beauty ere

now. 'England has not yet recognized my husband's claim as next heir,' she whispered. 'Major Counsellor, do you think your nation could ever be brought to recognize me as Duchess?'

'If the occasion arose,' answered the wily old soldier softly, 'I do not see—speaking as a man—how any request of yours could be refused. But I cannot answer for my nation. Still, if the occasion arose——' he hesitated as if searching for words, but in reality, waiting for his companion to take up the unfinished sentence.

The Countess trembled with excitement. This was indeed a triumph. She, 'silly Isolde,' as old Sagan was ever ready to call her, had gained a little bit of information they would give their ears to possess, but she would keep it and use it at her leisure. Meanwhile she must strike while the iron of old Counsellor's nature was yet hot.

'But the occasion will arise, believe me! Perhaps soon, at Sagan!' As she spoke she started violently, and her face turned white as Count Sagan stood before them.

'Do you feel inclined for a hand of whist, Counsellor?' he said abruptly, with a wrathful, questioning glance at his wife. 'Has my wife been boring you with her chatter?'

'On the contrary, Major Counsellor has promised to join us at the Castle next week,' exclaimed his wife.

Sagan's bloodshot eyes darkened. He had the

guile of a plotter, but lacked something of the self-control. Counsellor, who appeared to be watching the dancers, turned upon this and added:

'And I have been thanking Madame de Sagan for the invitation.' ,

'Ah, I knew you wouldn't come! Well, you will lose nothing. We shall have a houseful of fools,' interrupted the Count roughly.

'I have already accepted, and will with your permission, Count, be one of the fools,' replied Counsellor genially.

The Countess understood she had in some way put her foot in it, but as the two men walked away together she nodded complacently to herself, with the words, 'I know what I know!'

The tide of dancers still swept backwards and forwards as Madame de Sagan idly observed them, until her glance chanced to fall upon the opposite couple at the further end of the saloon. Something in Valerie's air fixed her wandering attention at once with a little shock. What was Rallywood saying to her? And where was Anthony Unziar? The Countess Isolde had to the full the all-devouring vanity of her type, but now, for once in her life, she felt desirous of forwarding a love affair that was not her own.

'You are going to Sagan, of course?' Valerie had said to her partner as they stood together.

'I think not,' Rallywood replied.

'I thought you would be sure to be in attendance' —she glanced carelessly towards the daïs where the

Countess was at the moment laying her fan on Counsellor's knee—'as usual.'

'No, Unziar is the lucky man,' Rallywood answered without significance in his tone.

'Nonsense! Anthony is her cousin!' said the girl impatiently.

Rallywood's grey eyes were on her face.

'Whose cousin? What do you mean?' he asked innocently.

Valerie bit her lip. She hated this Englishman. Of all her acquaintances he alone, in his blundering way, was able to put her somehow at a disadvantage.

'When the Duke goes to Sagan,' she said, without noticing his question, 'the Count has the privilege as colonel-in-chief of the Guard, of inviting any two officers he pleases to act with the escort. So we shall see.'

'I wonder,' said Rallywood after a pause, 'where you get your impressions from, Mademoiselle?'

'I see—like other people. We all form our judgments on what we see and—know!'

'What do you know, for instance?'

'I heard of you when you were at Kofn Ford, near the Castle of Sagan,' she answered.

Rallywood was only human, and however moderately he may have returned Madame de Sagan's preference, he was fully aware of its existence. In those days on the frontier he had, rather from fastidiousness than principle perhaps, avoided her and her invitations whenever possible. But that was

one thing; it was another to hear the matter coolly alluded to by the girl beside him. Involuntarily he drew a little away from her. His notions were founded less on actual knowledge and experience of women—for of that he had little—than gathered from that idealized version of the sex with which the right-minded male animal is usually furnished by his own mental and emotional processes. So far his intercourse with Isolde of Sagan had been limited to certain sentimental passages; the initiative lay with the lady, but Rallywood had once or twice been distinctly wrought upon by the appeals to his sympathy and pity. Now, however, looked at from a fresh standpoint, the one in fact from which Valerie viewed it, the subject became suddenly repellent, and he slid away from the discussion with another question.

'What has Unziar been saying of me? You have treated me differently since—that night.'

There appeared to be no need to particularize the night.

Mademoiselle Selpdorf understood both the first involuntary movement and the change of subject, and resented them equally.

'Anthony is generous, so generous!' she said with some warmth. 'I suppose it is an English trait to take everything and to give nothing in return. Anthony told me of all that took place in the Cloister of St. Anthony. Your action seemed to him so fine, poor fellow!—but not to me. You believed in your

luck, of course, and took the hazard and won, leaving him hopelessly at a disadvantage. I should not have accepted the position as he did—I should have forced you to fight it out sooner or later! I had rather a hundred times have died by your bullet than lived to endure your triumph!'

Rallywood pondered this view of the matter before he spoke.

'I dare say you are right,' he said at last; 'at least, no woman could have been so generous to another woman as he was to me.'

'You are complimentary, Captain Rallywood!'

'I beg your pardon. I only meant that women are not generous as between themselves. Looked at from your point of view, I see that I was wrong about that affair with Unziar. But more than all, it proves he is a splendid fellow.'

Now Unziar's praise from Rallywood's lips displeased Mademoiselle Selpdorf almost more than all which had gone before.

'It is easy to say these things, but'—she rose eagerly—'at last that figure is ended. What a stupid interval it has been!' she added with a little smile.

'I am sorry. I always have the misfortune to bore you,' Rallywood said, accepting his snub meekly.

'Never mind! You can't help it!' she responded with a pleasant nod as she left him.

Rallywood remained standing where he was.

'A very nasty one indeed for me. I shoudn't

wonder, though, if she forgave me for the sake of that last back-handed blow!' he reflected with some amusement.

Which proves that Révonde was teaching Rallywood something that has its own value at one period or another of a man's life. He was too poor to dream of marrying anyone, much less the daughter of the Chancellor of Maäsau, a woman whose training and tastes had not been guided on the lines of simplicity or economy. That Valerie Selpdorf attracted him was a truth to which his eyes began to be opened at the moment when Counsellor asked him why he haunted Madame de Sagan's entertainments. Then it had struck him that the almost certain chance of meeting Valerie was his chief motive, yet he believed it was safe to divulge to himself, since the girl bitterly disliked him, and he, in the strength of the insular and Puritan side of his nature, disapproved of her. It was the pleasure of the hour, no one looked beyond that in Révonde, and Rallywood had fallen into the universal habit of drifting.

'You are thoughtful. What can you have been talking about?' asked the Countess, coming up.

'Mademoiselle Selpdorf has been giving her opinion of me. It is not flattering, and I am depressed,' returned Rallywood, hoping the Countess meant to talk of Valerie.

'Has she? She is often absurd in her ideas. But we need not talk of her. To turn to something

pleasanter, do you know that I have just persuaded Major Counsellor to come to us at Sagan?'

Rallywood instantly perceived that the three or four days at the old frontier castle might prove to be a singularly interesting period, and regretted that he was not to be a guest also.

'And you are coming too, are you not?' went on Madame de Sagan, with a note in her voice that Rallywood was learning to dread.

'I fancy not. Unziar and Adiron have been mentioned.'

'Yes, Anthony Unziar, because he is my cousin and for the sake of Valerie. Also Captain Colendorp. I do not like him, he is always black and sneering, but the Count chose him yesterday, and then I suggested yourself. They were rather doubtful about you, but Baron von Elmur consented. And I was so glad—Jack!'

The friendship had been progressing, it will be perceived, during the last three weeks. But Rallywood made no immediate response, being absorbed in digesting the information she had given him. That the German minister should be permitted to dictate the guests for the three days' festivities at the Castle was in itself a pregnant fact. But further, the Germans had never before possessed old Sagan's confidence; his dislike of the encroaching mammoth, whom the whole little nation feared, was notorious. This new departure was therefore ominous.

'I had no notion that Baron von Elmur liked me any better than my countrymen,' said Rallywood aloud.

'Ah, no, perhaps not; but now, you will understand, he wishes to please me!' Countess Isolde answered with an air of mysterious importance.

'He is not alone in wishing to do that,' returned Rallywood, ashamed even as he uttered it of the meaningless compliment.

'Jack,' she said, with a proud raising of her blonde head, 'you are my friend, and of course you wish to please me. But everyone will want to stand well with me some day—when I have power—and then you shall see what I will do for those whom I wish to please!'

Every word she spoke added to the certainty that some new plot was afoot, and Rallywood glanced round for Counsellor's stout figure.

'You are glad to come to Sagan?' persisted his companion; 'say you are glad.'

'I've never been more glad of anything in my life!' Rallywood replied with truth, and then, his good angel rather than his mother wit coming to his rescue, he got away from the dancing-salon, and found Counsellor at the entrance preparing to leave.'

'I'll walk round with you, Major,' he proposed.

'I'm not going your way,' replied Counsellor. 'Besides, I wish to drive. Hullo, you have got hold of my gloves!' and snatching at the gloves—which happened to be Rallywood's—he thrust his

own into the young man's hand, saying in a low voice as he did so, 'Be on the Cloister Bridge in half an hour. Good-night!'

At the appointed time, Rallywood, having replaced his military greatcoat by one less remarkable, was waiting on the bridge, when he was accosted by a hunchbacked fellow in a shabby Maäsaun sheepskin, who dropped a rough English 'Good-night,' as he passed. Presently Rallywood followed him until they came out into an open country road where the biting *tsa* met them full face.

'This *tsa* is deadly! Quick! what is it you have to tell me?' said Counsellor's voice.

Rallywood answered in a few rapid sentences.

'Yes, I fancied something of the kind was due. What an inestimable blessing it is that such women as the Countess Sagan exist—to satisfy diplomatic curiosity! We must find out the precise limits of the German game at the Castle of Sagan. It is lucky for you, John, my son, that your duty as a Maäsaun soldier to the Maäsaun nation and as an Englishman to your own, run in this instance on the same lines.'

'They always will.'

'Don't be too sure of that! There may come a day when your public and your private honour will stand face to face, hopelessly irreconcilable. What then?'

'When anything so extremely awkward comes to pass, I suppose I shall have to make up my mind on

the subject,' replied Rallywood with a lazy yawn. 'In the meantime it is too much trouble. Just at present my part is simple, and I look for the game to turn in our favour.'

Counsellor stood still, as if in consideration, for a minute.

'The stake may seem to be a small one—just this useless scrap of country,' he said at length, 'but the issues are far-reaching, and therefore all Europe is taking a hand in the game. How will it end? I don't know! The Fates shuffle and men handle the cards, but God cuts! Thirty years' experience has taught me that. I didn't belive it once—I do now.'

CHAPTER VIII.

A QUESTION OF THE GUARD.

THE really great strategist is not the man who loves an intricate plot. His method is simple, he eliminates.

On a certain cold morning, when the sun shone pinkly through a sea-haze over the glittering roofs of Révonde, a review of the Guard, and of a few regiments that happened to be stationed within a short distance of the capital, was to be held, in honour of the Duke's birthday, on the spacious parade ground of the Guard, which occupied the whole of a small plateau lying high between the beetling hills behind the barracks.

Baron von Elmur paid an early visit to the Chancellor on his way to the review, and found M. Selpdorf, though brisk and urbane as ever, a little difficult.

'We do not progress, Monsieur,' Elmur was saying.

'What would you, my dear Baron? we have so many obstacles in our path,' answered the other, shrugging his shoulders good-humoredly.

Elmur leaned his elbow on the table.

'I know that delay can conduce to no good end,'

he said. 'You have agreed that a certain course is desirable no less for your country than mine.'

'Have I agreed to that proposition? Not altogether! Remember, I cannot be expected to see with German eyes.'

'Even to the most patriotic Maäsaun it must be evident that sooner or later the State must fall to us; it is merely a question of time.'

'The time has already been long,' said the Chancellor softly.

'For an excellent reason: because we have not always been as now, a huge bulk. The bulk of the new Empire must by force of gravitation attract all the smaller bodies round to itself. It is by a miracle only that Maäsau has stood alone so long.'

'And by another miracle she might go on standing alone a little longer.'

'This is not the age of miracles, my friend!'

'I remember also something which your Excellency forgets,' said Selpdorf, with a touch of sadness in his voice, 'that there have been Selpdorfs helping in this miracle of the independence of Maäsau for generations.'

Elmur altered his attitude with an open impatience.

'You are a far-sighted patriot, Monsieur. It is needless to repeat that if Maäsau joins the confederation of the Empire by her own act she will do so on very different terms to any which could possibly be conceded to a state that had forced upon us the

unpleasant necessity of coercion. Remember Frankfurt! She paid for her obstinacy. Whereas we are prepared to deal generously towards those who cast in their lot with ours. Besides,' he added significantly, 'I am urging you to consult not only the interests of Maäsau, but your own also.'

'They are the same, and it is difficult to know where our true interest lies,' said Selpdorf, thoughtfully. 'Do you go to the Castle of Sagan next week?'

The abrupt change of subject seemed to have its effect upon Elmur. He turned away from the table, crossed his legs, and lit a cigarette in a leisurely manner before he answered.

'Yes; and you, Monsieur?'

'I have no inclination for these gaieties; but my daughter goes.' Von Elmur shot a glance at his companion.

'To repeat my own words—we do not progress, my dear Selpdorf.'

'So? Women finesse in these affairs. Valerie follows the custom of her sex, and perhaps she has become a little spoilt by overmuch admiration. Were she aware of your wishes, it would solve many of the present doubts.'

'It takes two to make that especial kind of bargain,' said Elmur, with a curious smile, 'one to ask, the other to grant. I am prepared to ask when I am assured that my request will be favourably received. An ambassador is esteemed in just the

same degree as the country he represents. If his country triumph he triumphs also.'

'In this case I might point out that your personal success,' the Chancellor said airily, 'would be the best, shall I say the only possible, preliminary to the success of the mission with which his Imperial Majesty has charged you.'

Elmur drew in his lips slightly. Valerie, as the Baroness von Elmur, was to be her father's guarantee for the future! Although Elmur's desires lay in the same direction, Selpdorf's insistence was most unpalatable to the German minister.

'I am ready to lay myself at Mademoiselle's feet,' he said aloud, 'but there is always the picturesque young captain of the Guard.'

'Unziar? I can positively reassure your Excellency on that point.'

'Unziar? No! The Englishman—Rallywood.'

'Rallywood?' said the Chancellor in very real surprise, 'what of him?'

'Nothing beyond the fact that he has an aptitude for challenging fate. Such men dazzle the eyes, and are consequently apt to be dangerous. Why has he been placed in the Guard?'

'I placed him there to serve our mutual convenience,' replied Selpdorf. 'He is an Englishman, with his full share of English intolerance and courage. On the other hand, the Guard resent the intrusion of foreigners, neither are they—mild-mannered.'

Elmur considered.

'The chances were in favour of trouble certainly. Had there been trouble Rallywood might have disposed of some of our chief difficulties for us,' he remarked, with a cynical smile.

'He might also have been disposed of himself,' said Selpdorf, 'and he is the one human being for whom the good Counsellor has the slightest regard. In politics it is necessary to consider the personal equation. To touch Counsellor in his weakest point would have been to alienate England at the convenient moment.'

'All that might have been true'—Elmur shrugged his shoulders; unluckily we must face things as they actually are.'

'Even now Rallywood has his uses. The Guard is composed of the flower of our nobility—they are not to be tempted. At least that is my opinion, although I believe Count Sagan holds differently. But this Rallywood is a soldier of fortune, a mercenary. You perceive?'

Elmur stroked his chin dubiously.

'I am very much afraid he belongs to the wrong breed. However, I would wish to point out that it will be essential to carry through this matter quickly. If the Duke could be persuaded to accept the scheme of reversion, the whole arrangement would be completed before the world was the wiser.'

'It is the simplest plan, and therefore the best,

But what will England say? Counsellor is here, that in itself speaks.'

'Neither England nor the good Counsellor can touch an accomplished fact. As they say in their own idiom, "Possession is nine parts of the law." It remains with us to make the fact.'

Selpdorf arose.

'Your Excellency will excuse me. It is time to start for the palace. To-day his Highness the Duke holds a review of the Guard. I will if possible sound him on the subject which interests us both. Should that fail, we must consider the alternative scheme.'

Half-an-hour later the two men met again as they dismounted in the court-yard of the palace. They approached each other courteously.

'There stands the real obstacle to our success,' said Elmur in a low tone.

Selpdorf followed the German Minister's glance. Standing there, in the fire-light of the guard-room, was the tall figure of Anthony Unziar, waiting with haughty stiffness for the appearance of the Duke.

'His Highness's gentlemen, the Maäsaun Guard,' went on Elmur with a bitter sneer, 'the impersonation of an arrogant militarism!'

'Seven—to be counted with,' corrected Selpdorf gently. 'The other, the eighth——'

'Has the initial fault of nationality. However, he goes to Sagan.'

The mist cleared as the sun rose higher until, by

noon, the sky was of a pale radiant blue laced with a delicate broidery of white wind-scattered clouds. Looking westward the dark river wound away to the sea, ringed here and there by the highly decorated bridges of light-toned granite peculiar to Maäsau. Révonde, in the sunshine, shone in the colours of a moss-grown stone, gray and green, the twin ridges on which it stood fretted and embossed to their summits with the palaces and pinnacles, the spires and towers, and gardens of the spreading city. The Grand Duke, as they rounded the mounting road to the parade ground, looked back upon Révonde with a lingering glance. Selpdorf who was seated opposite to him, had been replying to his grumbling questions as to the condition of the royal exchequer with a depressing account of the hopelessness of the situation.

'Révonde is a jewel after all!' said the Duke suddenly; 'a jewel can always be mortgaged, Selpdorf.'

Selpdorf admitted that this was true, and also hinted that the jewel had been used in one way or another pretty freely to raise the revenues for a good many years, without giving much in the way of a *quid pro quo,* beyond the vague hopes and airy promises which pledged the Maäsaun government to little or nothing. But now, he explained, the Powers were growing weary of so unprofitable a speculation, and were inclined to expect some definite return for their assistance.

The Duke listened moodily, lying back on his

cushions, a thin-legged, paunchy figure, whose features had lost their shapely mould under the touch of dissipation. The nose hung long and fleshy between the pouched skin of his cheekbones, the eyes showed a tell-tale slackness in the under eyelid, where it merged into the loose wrinkles below. The lower part of the face was covered by a long but sparse moustache, through which at times could be discerned that terrible protrusion of the upper lip that seems the herald of senility. Yet Gustave, Grand Duke of Maäsau, was only that day celebrating the completion of his fifty-seventh year.

Where the carriage attained the level of the plateau, the main road curved away inland to the right, while upon the left hand, under the wall of encircling brown cliffs, a small brigade of all arms was assembled to do honour to their ruler. Through a cut in the hills far away, but seemingly nearer on that windy morning, could be seen a blue open bay, blown into the 'innumerable laughter of the sea.' The air, the whole scene, was inspiriting, but the Duke looked heavily on as the troops deployed and turned, their arms glittering in the sunlight.

First in order came a couple of squadrons of the Frontier Cavalry, with their black sheepskins hanging behind them; then infantry, followed by two batteries of artillery divided by some more cavalry, and, after a distinct interval, the Guard.

The little army was perfect in equipment and finish, and their uniforms were brilliant and pictur-

esque; but the Duke stared out of the amphitheatre of the parade ground with dissatisfaction and *ennui*. Money, he wanted money, and the less the Chancellor could encourage him to hope for it the more he desired to have it by hook or by crook.

The Grand Marshal of Maäsau having been dismissed from the side of the royal carriage with a few curt words, the Duke spoke again, in a low tone to Selpdorf.

'Then you wish me to understand that there is no more to be got out of anybody. I know better than that. England, Germany, and Russia, are waiting to outbid each other.'

'That is true, sire; but they will not deal on the old terms.'

The Guard, with scattered pennons flying, were drawn up at the lower end of the parade ground. The chief effect of the day was about to take place—the charge of the Guard.

'I am now of an age,' remarked the Duke peevishly, 'when my birthdays have ceased to be a cause for congratulation. This review is an anachronism. In my father's time I rode at the head of the Guard, and led a charge on the day I was eighteen. Pish! I have grown wiser, and know how to enjoy life after a more rational fashion. To return to our other subject—What do they want?'

Selpdorf smiled, and passed his fingers upwards over the erect corners of his moustache.

'For example, there is a power that might pay a

heavy annual sum if your Highness would consent to disband your Guard!' he said, with a tentative smile.

The slack fallen lines of the Duke's visage grew suddenly tense. His eyes brightened as the tossing mass in green and gold swept down towards them in a thunder of hoofs, and the long-drawn shout of 'Maäsau,' with which the Guard have charged home on so many a battlefield.

As the splendid ranks of horsemen crashed past under a flashing play of saluting swords, the Duke pulled himself erect in his carriage and raised his gloved hand in acknowledgment with a strong fling of enthusiasm that recalled to men present other and better days.

Selpdorf's brow lost its round smoothness for a short moment, but cleared again before the Duke dropped back with a groan into his seat.

'Disband the Guard? What traitor suggested that? May the Guard shoot me first! I'd rather rot of starvation than consent to it! For with the Guard is bound up the freedom of Maäsau!'

Presently he turned upon the Chancellor with a glooming and suspicious gaze.

'Has Sagan been tampering with you?' he asked, with a sneer, 'if he tempted you now it would only be to betray you later! He hankers after Maäsau, but remember my cousin in England. He has claims which cannot be over-ridden.'

Selpdorf remained respectfully silent for a short

time, revolving the extremely important admission with regard to the second claimant to the heritage of the Duchy, which the Duke in his excitement had made.

The first and simpler plan of persuading the Duke to enter into an understanding with Germany, to the effect that she should enjoy the reversion of Maäsau in exchange for the payment of a secured annuity, was plainly hopeless. It now remained to put in motion the second scheme, which contained elements of infinitely greater danger.

Human nature is a complex thing, yet each man's attitude of mind towards himself, is often only an extension of his attitude of mind towards his neighbour.

What the Chancellor said to himself to whitewash his conduct in his own eyes, who can tell? The Duke, old vice-sodden reprobate as he was, had that one remnant of manhood left, a determination to face the last and most absolute contingency of life rather than sell his country.

Perhaps Selpdorf used that most guilty of all excuses—If I do not put my hand to this thing someone else will. Maäsau must fall sooner or later to some larger power. May not I profit by it as well as another? Did he set his house of excuse upon the sand of a certain bitter writing? 'I will persuade them,' said Satan—'I will make them two idols, which they shall call Honour and Fidelity, and

a law which shall be called passive obedience. And they shall worship these idols!' If Honour, Fidelity, and Obedience be idols, where then, are the true gods?

CHAPTER IX.

THE CASTLE OF SAGAN.

THE broadly flowing Kofn forms part of the north-eastern boundary of the State of Maäsau. Its dark waters rush tumultuously from the gorge below the Castle of Sagan,and fling a vast enclosing arm about the bleak plains and marshes of which the wastes of the frontier consist.

It is a land where even summer dwells coldly.

To the north a chain of hills rises black against the sky, and there, set upon a boldly jutting spur, the Castle of Sagan dominates the inhospitable landscape like a frown upon a sinister face.

The whole spur and the hill behind it are rough with ragged pine-woods, and, below, the banks shelve to the river with a broken scattering of deciduous trees, that leave on the eye the chill impression of leafless branches tangled against a background of grey and stony slopes.

Some two or three miles south of the Castle the river breaks across a step-like outcrop of rock, and thus forms that famous ford, across which the Counts of Sagan used in the old days to lead their foraging expeditions over the border.

Simon of Sagan, the present Count, inherited in

an unmodified degree the more predatory and uncivilized instincts of his forefathers. Illiterate, brutal, and cunning, the thin vaneer laid by the nineteenth century upon his coarse-grained nature was apt to rub off on the very slightest friction, bringing the original savage to the surface.

He was at once the terror and the pride of the stolid, silent peasantry that lived under his rule. A fierce and fearless sportsman, his dependents delighted in boasting of the prowess of a master whose capricious cruelties they never dreamed of resenting. With Sagan, throughout life, to desire was to have, and in his pursuit of the wished-for object, he was hampered by no new-fangled sentiments of honour, truth, or loyalty. Like other savages he quickly tired of his fancies when once gratified. Not four years ago he had been possessed by a frantic passion for the beautiful young wife whom he had now come to regard with something dangerously near hate.

In dealing with such a temperament as this both Elmur and Selpdorf were well aware that they were handling an explosive that might at any moment wreck their most carefully laid plans. They would very much have preferred to have made a tool of the reigning Duke, but Selpdorf, who had been plying him for more than a month with a ceaseless and exhaustive course of innuendo, discouragement, and veiled temptation, was at length convinced, by the Duke's reply on the day of the review, that nothing further was to be hoped for in that direction.

For this reason the German party was obliged to fall back on Count Sagan. That he was untrammelled by principle, and was, moreover, prepared to meet them half-way, rendered their schemes no whit safer. The only hope of security lay in clinching the matter as quickly as it was possible to do so. Once the German grasp had been fairly laid upon the State, the nominal sovereign might struggle as he liked, he could hurt no one but himself.

M. Selpdorf's chief contribution towards the new plot—which was to be carried out at the Count's own fortress, the Castle of Sagan—consisted in sending an urgent letter after his daughter, begging her to fall in with von Elmur's wishes.

Valerie received the letter in Madame de Sagan's apartments. The Countess lay on a couch, reading a French novel and yawning.

'What a devoted papa!' she exclaimed, glancing up.

Valerie did not immediately reply. She was standing at the deep embayed window that looked out towards the river and the apparently endless desolation beyond. She only moved very slightly, thereby turning her back even more completely upon her companion. The girl had not lived so long in an atmosphere of diplomacy without learning the wisdom of keeping her own counsel.

She had for some time been aware of Baron von Elmur's admiration, but only of late had he seemed anxious to make his aspirations manifest to the pub-

lic—a much more significant fact. For the German was in one way a universal admirer, he made qualified love to most of the good-looking ladies about the Court, and also, perhaps, more pointedly, to some who were not so good-looking, thus gaining much profit and some pleasure. His high-shouldered, portly, personable figure, his handsome face with its close-set narrow eyes, rose before Valerie's mental eye. Her future husband? How absurd, how impossible! And she suddenly laughed a soft, throaty ripple of laughter.

Isolde moved noiselessly, and coming behind Valerie, caught her by the shoulders and swung her half round.

'What are you laughing at?' she asked over the girl's shoulder.

Valerie moved away gently from under the slender hands.

'Can you imagine yourself in love with Baron von Elmur?' she asked.

'Were you laughing at that?' inquired the other incredulously.

'Yes,' with another little laugh.

'Ah! the devoted papa has been writing of Baron von Elmur?' said the Countess, with an arch smile.

'But, I can understand being in love with von Elmur! He is—difficult. Men no longer in their first youth are much the more interesting. The love of a young man is simple, he says what he means; but when he grows older it is not so. By that time

he has gathered memories, enlightenment, experiences; and he begins by thinking he knows one through and through. And why?—because he knows other women—and them how imperfectly! As if we were not as various as the colours in the old Sagan diadem! Each woman is made differently, and each reflects her own colour. To teach a man—old enough to appreciate it—this little fact about ourselves is, I assure you, never a dull amusement.'

Valerie paused before she spoke.

'Now I know why you are married, Isolde!'

'Ah, yes; but I was too young to realize that Sagan is a bear who cannot be taught to dance. I had just left school. I could not choose. But you, Valerie, you have a future before you! Poor Anthony, like all other young men, is desperately in earnest, he gives one the blues. I know he already bores you; but von Elmur—— Ah, that is altogether another affair!'

Madame de Sagan sank down beside a little buhl-table, and tapped on it impatiently with her slight fingers. Against the light of the afternoon glow she watched the outline of Valerie's cheek. For Mdlle. Selpdorf had returned to her contemplation of the landscape. A curl of blue smoke from among the trees on the nearer bank of the Kofn held her gaze and suggested thoughts, which she was taking up one by one, as it were, and examining soberly enough.

Rallywood had been stationed at Kofn Ford when

first Isolde made his acquaintance. The girl recalled a description she had heard of the tall young Englishman galloping along the flat road to the rescue of the pretty, terrified Countess, whose Arab had been merely cantering along, capering now and again from sheer light-heartedness and without malicious intent, until its timid rider chose to scream, when it reared and started with flying hoofs towards the marshes. Valerie went on to picture Rallywood holding the trembling woman on her saddle till her escort and grooms overtook them, and at the picture the girl's lip curled and quivered with angry scorn—of a sudden she hated and despised them both, but especially she despised Rallywood for having succumbed to Isolde's shallow beauty! Thus it will be seen that Mdlle. Selpdorf was inclined to underrate Madame de Sagan's points. Isolde was not only wonderfully pretty, but she was endowed with a superficial cleverness, and kindliness and tact, all of which rendered her irresistible to nine men out of ten. A moral chameleon, Isolde almost always believed in herself and her own moods, therefore it was little wonder that the men whose phases of humour she reflected believed in her also, and moreover thought her as adorable and as full of delicious changes as Cleopatra.

Isolde had told the story of her adventure to Valerie, dwelling on the facts that the hero detested—absolutely detested—all other women, also that in physique he followed the most approved English pat-

tern, and was an exceptionally good specimen at that. Altogether Valerie had found the description sufficiently attractive to induce her to pay Rallywood that coquettish little visit in the ante-room of the Hôtel du Chancelier.

While these things passed through her thoughts her eyes were still fixed upon the blue plume of smoke that rose and melted over Kofn Ford, for its position indicated the whereabouts of the blockhouse used by the Frontier Patrol, and there Rallywood had lived during the early part of his acquaintance with Isolde.

'What are you thinking of?' inquired Madame de Sagan suddenly; then, as Valerie made no immediate answer, she added, 'Shall I tell you, Valerie?'

The other turned, with the pink of sunset lighting up her pale face.

'I don't imagine you can guess,' she said, with a faint smile.

Madame de Sagan's little trill of laughter was not quite so childish and irresponsible as usual.

'But I can. You were thinking of Rallywood. You think rather often of Rallywood, my dear girl.'

The guess, so near the truth, startled Valerie, although she gave no sign. What could have suggested such an idea to Isolde? Instantly Valerie was on the defensive. Her delicate nostrils quivered slightly, and her hand—a larger and more capable hand than Isolde's—closed more firmly upon her father's letter, as she replied, with that firm direct-

ness which was so surprising a trait in her father's daughter:—

'Yes, I was thinking of him—and you. The block-house where he lived is down there, I can see the smoke. That reminded me of it all. By the way, Isolde, it seems that some young men have a shade of interest about them.'

'This one is rather unlike all the others,' returned Madame de Sagan, with gravity. 'He saved my life, and, well, he is different to anybody else. He assumes nothing.'

It is a fact worthy of consideration that while a man rarely establishes a claim on a woman by rendering her a service, a woman always establishes a claim on a man by being rendered a service. Perhaps this is as it should be.

'No,' repeated Valerie, thoughtfully, 'he certainly assumes—nothing.'

'What do you mean by that, Valerie?' exclaimed Isolde irritably. 'You are in one of your incomprehensible moods to-day. What do you think of Rallywood?'

'I hardly know what to think yet. Very likely I shall never come to any conclusion about him. He is not my affair, and what can be more uninteresting than a man who has saved some other woman's life?' She laughed. 'You have recommended von Elmur to my notice—I shall certainly spend my time to more profit in studying him.'

A servant entered.

'His Excellency Baron von Elmur wishes to wait upon your ladyship.'

Elmur advanced bowing. After greeting his hostess, he turned to Valerie with a manner that was new in their intercourse. He dropped from the courtier to the man pure and simple.

Kissing the girl's hand he said earnestly:

'I feared you were not to arrive until to-morrow.'

Madame de Sagan, who had raised her eyebrows and made a little grimace at Valerie behind the Minister's back, here interposed:

'I persuaded her to travel here with me. I hope, Baron, you feel how greatly I have befriended you!'

'You will find me grateful, Madame. In the meantime, I have been sent to warn you that his Highness has already arrived at the foot of the hill, and to beg you to descend to the great hall, where the Count is waiting to receive him.'

'Come, Valerie,' said the Countess, with a little catch in her breath, and an added fleck of colour in her soft cheeks.

The great hall was half-filled with servants and retainers, ranged according to the fashion, which has obtained at Sagan during the memory of man, for the ceremonious reception of the reigning Duke. Half a dozen huntsmen held in leash as many couples of huge boarhounds at one side of the hall; on the other, servants, carrying gold trays of refreshments, stood in line. Above these, again, clustered the numerous guests who had already arrived.

As the Countess, looking very young and fair and slender, walked down the centre, Sagan, who had been draining a goblet of wine, thrust the cup back upon the tray, and catching his wife's hand roughly, said, with an audible oath:

'You're late.'

She shrank back, suppressing a cry, from his angry grasp; but few had time to notice the incident, for the outer door clanged back upon its hinges to admit the Duke, who, shivering in his furs, entered upon the arm of Colendorp.

Sagan advanced to meet him, but the Duke, glancing round the hall with a shudder, cut his formal greetings short.

'Sagan wears a more gloomy and cut-throat air than ever, Cousin,' he said, irritably.

Sagan's response was covered by the entrance of the suite, the whole party being brought up by Rallywood and a couple of troopers of the Guard. Then Sagan, with a scowling face, offered the Duke the customary cup of wine, and, comparative silence being restored, the ducal answer came peevishly to all ears:

'No, my good Simon, your wine is like yourself, rather too strong and a trifle rough for my taste. Let Briot be called. I have brought my own drinking.'

So saying, he waved the attendants aside, and, approaching Isolde, he raised her as she curtsied deeply.

'There is one point, Madame, in which I can never hope to rival my cousin of Sagan. My wine may be more palatable; but I could never find a wife more beautiful or—more wise than his!' he said, with malicious gallantry.

Then bending forward he kissed the Countess with empressment on both cheeks. She trembled under the caress, though she was hardly aware of it, for her eyes were on her husband, whose daily increasing dislike of herself she could not understand, and was only newly beginning to dread. Valerie, standing immediately behind the Countess, overheard and resented the details of the scene. It was unbearable to see Isolde helplessly baited by Sagan and the Duke—each man gratifying the spleen of the moment at the expense of a woman, who was obliged to submit to their discourtesy. Of all the guests Mdlle. Selpdorf alone stood erect, forgetting, in her indignation, to join in the general obeisance. The Grand Duke, looking up, found her flushed and flashing, and superlatively handsome. His flabby cheeks twitched, and his bleared eyes brightened.

'Mademoiselle Selpdorf, since you will not salute me, I can at least claim the right as your Duke to salute you,' he said, stepping towards her.

Instantly Valerie sank into an exaggerated curtsy, thus adroitly avoiding the Duke's outstretched hand and ready lips. His feeble legs failed, he stumbled forward and pitched into the arms of Elmur, who set

him upright with a gentle skilfulness that almost cheated the eyes of the spectators.

The Duke, slightly shaken, and exceedingly annoyed, turned upon the girl:

'Mademoiselle grows proud!'

'Forgive me, sire; I did not dream that you would stoop so low!' rejoined the girl, with apparent humility.

'If you will not accept the salute of your Duke, Mademoiselle, may I ask to what you aspire?' he added contemptuously.

Valerie was not of a meek spirit, and she saw a way in which she might revenge Isolde, little comprehending the far-reaching consequences of her thoughtless words.

'I aspire to be maid of honour to the Grand Duchess of Maäsau!' she answered, with a glance towards the Countess.

The Duke glared around him into the circle of half-curious, half-terrified faces, for this was a piercing home-thrust, his eye dwelt for a moment on Sagan, towering tall and rugged and strong as one of his own native rocks, and he recognised that his cousin, although ten years his senior as age is counted, was infinitely younger in his unimpaired energies and rude health. Also, Duke Gustave of Maäsau was superstitious, and it struck him as an ill omen that the representative of Selpdorf should have failed him at the critical moment, and thus flung him headlong into the arms of Germany!

Out of all these crowding thoughts arose not only vivid fear, but a resolution, of which none at that time believed him to be capable. He grew white about the mouth, his protruding lip twitched ominously.

'It is not always lucky for even so young and beautiful a woman as you are to count on dead men's shoes,' he said, in a low, penetrating voice.

A happy inspiration came to Madame de Sagan. She took Valerie's hand in hers, and addressed the Duke with a quivering smile that somehow vouched for her earnestness at the moment.

'You mistake Valerie, sire; she and I both desire the same honour—to attend your Highness's Consort, if it would please you to take one.'

'It might please me, Madame; but I doubt it would please your husband little,' retorted the Duke.

'I hoped your Highness knew me better!' protested Sagan sulkily.

'I do, my good Simon, I know you much better!' said the Duke laughing. 'Now, pray lead me to my apartments. The journey to Sagan fatigues in this weather—and, after all, it would look better if I died at home—in the palace at Révonde.'

At a glance from Elmur, Sagan motioned his wife forward.

'I will lead you to your apartments, sire,' she said, offering the Duke her slender hand. 'I am sure that the air of Sagan is as loyal as ourselves, and will do for you all that we should wish it to do.'

For answer the Duke shook his head feebly; and, calling Colendorp to his side, passed up the long hall through a rustling silence.

CHAPTER X.

COUNT SIMON OF SAGAN.

ALTHOUGH secretly dismayed at the effect produced by her rash championship of Madame de Sagan, Valerie kept up a semblance of self-possession. Her clear colouring faded to extreme pallor, but her proud eyes showed no sign of shrinking from the curious glances cast upon her. She caught a trenchant aside from Sagan to Elmur:

'These cursed women will ruin us!'

And in answer to this even Elmur's flattery was mute. But Valerie stood haughty and erect, watching the Duke's suite file up the hall, Rallywood, as before, bringing up in the rear.

As he came in line with her he turned his head, and their glances met.

That look, which she always recalled as distinctively his, was wiped from the young man's gray eyes; they fell upon her stern, alienated, almost inimical. The change struck her like a blow. But before she could fling back her silent defiance at him, he was gone, without a second glance, or seeking in any manner to soften the insolent rebuke he had dared to convey.

She resolved to go to her own rooms and make instant arrangements for a return to Révonde. Her heart was hot in her, as, looking round, she found herself standing alone. Elmur, apparently forgetful of the deep personal devotion he had so lately manifested, was conversing with a group of Maäsaun nobles, his back turned conveniently towards her. Sagan had disappeared, and not one of those whom she knew so well, and who, ten minutes ago, would have felt honoured by seeking her, but now seemed too deeply engaged to notice that she stood alone.

A moment later Counsellor approached her. She had known him slightly for a long time, but she now for the first time fully met the shrewd, kindly eyes under their shaggy brows. Instantly she liked him, and to her own surprise found herself talking of the indiscretion of which she had been guilty, and of her wish to return to Révonde in consequence.

'Mademoiselle, are you a loyal Maäsaun?' asked Counsellor gravely.

Valerie's soft dark eyes gazed steadily back into his.

'I am loyal,' she replied, in an earnest undertone.

'Then stay in Sagan. If your words carried so long a tag of meaning to others, you can see that Maäsau may have need of all her loyal children soon.'

'Whom can we trust?' she asked suddenly, almost in a whisper, for Elmur, seeing her in conversation

with Counsellor, now approached with a ceremonious air.

Counsellor smiled as he stood squarely beside her.

'Choose!' he said, briefly.

'Choose what?' asked Elmur in his most deferential manner. Madamoiselle's choice in the most trivial matters is of importance.'

Valerie smiled. Not a trace of disturbance was perceptible in her manner, and Elmur, noting it, came to the final conclusion that this girl was not only extraordinarily handsome, but also exceptionally capable. Having made so grievous a mistake, and taken the punishment of it, she was still mistress of herself. It was a gallant spirit, and well worth capturing.

'Major Counsellor has asked me to choose flowers for the ball to-night. I choose roses. I think it is very nice of me, Major Counsellor, for is not the rose the emblem of England?' said the girl, with a coquettish smile at the older man.

Elmur's face clouded. This interfering old fellow had the power of making friends, which means the power of being a dangerous enemy.

'I had hoped,' he said aloud, 'to have the pleasure of begging Mademoiselle to accept my flowers.'

'You are too late, Baron; but perhaps you will escort me to the west tower, where I daresay Madame de Sagan is already waiting for me.'

Counsellor looked after the tall graceful figure of the girl as she ascended the staircase with Elmur at

her side. He could see she was still laughing and talking to her companion, but her ready parry of the German's question, including a clear reply to his own, showed him that the Chancellor's daughter was much more than a mere wilful girl.

'John Rallywood,' he grunted, as he turned away, 'is after all not so great an ass as he thinks himself.'

An attendant intercepted the German before he regained the hall, after leaving Valerie with Madame de Sagan.

'My lord desires to speak with your Excellency,' he said.

Elmur frowned. He wished to allow Count Simon time to cool before meeting him, but this summons was imperative, and, besides, he knew the danger of failing to provide a safety-valve in the shape of a listener, before the Count could blow off the first ebullitions of rage over Mdlle. Selpdorf's untoward speech. If pent up within his own breast, there was no knowing in how disastrous a manner Sagan's ill-humour might explode. Defeat meant much to Elmur, his reputation was at stake. Other men had undertaken this same mission—to bring about the annexation to the Fatherland of this troublesome little state; they had failed, therefore Elmur had pledged himself to succeed.

Elmur stood with his back against a massive carved bookshelf, and looked at Sagan, who, with a cigar-butt buried in his ragged beard, was walking,

with long, uncertain steps, up and down the floor. The tiger in the old man was awake.

'Act I., Scene I.,' said Elmur at last, and with a smile.

Sagan stopped short and turned a bloodshot sidelong glare upon him, his dark old fingers working convulsively.

'By heaven! It is going to be a tragedy!' he shouted, and burst into a whirlwind of hideous curses, coupled with the names of Valerie and his wife.

The German picked out a comfortable chair and seated himself, crossing his legs with a manifest intention of patience. There was a horrible energy in the old man's attitudes. His long smouldering ambition, nursed and fed of late, had now flamed into a regnant passion, and the cooler, more wary, unscrupulousness of the younger man looked with repugnance upon the blind fury of the Duke that was to be.

In no great space of time the sight of that impassive, high-shouldered figure, sitting calmly by, imposed a growing sense of restraint upon the Count.

'What do you think of our chances now that Gustave's suspicions have been set on the alert?' he asked at last, coming to a stop in front of Elmur. 'That fool of a wife of mine has blabbed to Selpdorf's danghter, and she in her turn blabs before all the world.'

Elmur sat still and dumb. His face enraged Sagan once more.

'But I am master in Sagan. The girl must be got rid of! There are a hundred dangers in our mountains and marshes. Do you not understand?'

Baron von Elmur stood up. He bore his most dignified air, and there was something in his whole aspect that made the Count pause.

'In the first place, her death under the circumstances would look strange. In the second, we have nothing to gain from it,' he said.

Sagan's red eyes twinkled cunningly.

'Hear my plan. I am not so squeamish as you thin-blooded moderns, or at least as you pretend to be!' He placed his finger on the Minister's breast, and drew back a little, the better to enjoy the approbation he expected to read in the other's face. 'We will say that the girl fell ill, and I, in my anxiety, sent Madame Sagan—my own wife, mark you—to accompany her to Révonde. If both should happen to be killed by an accident we should be well rid of them—and what could the world say?'

Elmur drew away from the insistive finger with an unmistakable movement. He bowed stiffly and moved towards the door.

'I do not know what the world might do or say but I can answer for Ludwig von Elmur. My master does not deal in murder, my lord, and so I beg your leave to withdraw.'

'What?' sneered the other, 'he does not deal in

murder? Rather, you would say, he prefers to deal in murder wholesale! What of your wars and annexations? What of the Germans in West Africa? Take care, Elmur, that you are not acting over hastily. For my part I don't believe that a life or so would weigh too heavy in the balance as against a province, even in your master's judgment. I take my world as I find it, my good Baron!'

'Pardon me, my lord, you take the world as your ancestors found it! You may be all your fathers were, but however time goes at Sagan, the rest of the world has not stood still since the middle ages. And the world is on my side to-day. Besides,' he added more suavely, 'we should gain nothing. We should alienate Selpdorf, who is useful, and who knows too much. As for the Duke, after such an affair he could never be eased of his suspicions.'

'I don't ask to ease him, I mean to cure him,' retorted Sagan, meaningly.

'I am certain Madame de Sagan has been silent. The speech of Mdlle. Selpdorf was the indignant outburst of a girl who thought her friend discourteously treated.'

'Discourteously treated? Isolde rudely treated? By whom?'

'Forgive me once more, my lord; but, in the first place, by yourself.'

Sagan laughed aloud; his ill-temper vanishing before the humour of the notion that anyone could

take exception to a man's rudeness towards his own wife.

'Pooh! the girl is a bigger idiot than I thought her. Let us hope she'll never meet with worse at the hands of her own husband.'

'I join in the hope, my lord, since I am to be that most fortunate man!' It was not the most felicitous moment, but Elmur was aware that in no other way could he assure Valerie's safety against the treachery of his colleague.

Sagan fell back a step.

'So—the wind blows from that quarter? Take heed, Baron, Selpdorf is a slippery fish.'

'But by this arrangement we land him finally.'

'It may be so.' Sagan tugged broodingly at his beard, after a pause adding, 'Well, well, the girl is safe enough for me, if you can answer for her. Come back and sit down. We must act while Gustave is here. Once we secure the Guard, we can force him to do—as we please. First a compromise, then abdication, then—' he brought his hand down heavily upon the table and sat staring before him at a vision of a dream fulfilled—a vision of Duke Simon of Maäsau.

Elmur's lip curled as he watched the man, who, for the time being, was oblivious of all but the realisation of his own ambition. Duke Simon! a name, but never a living power—only a German puppet, pulled hither and thither at will by the controlling hand.

'What are your plans, my lord?' he asked aloud.

The Count started, and raised his head.

'We have three of the Guard here—Unziar, Rallywood, Colendorp. You know that as soon as we have made sure of their officers the men will follow of themselves. Now Unziar is no saint.'

'But he fights the better because he is a sinner.'

'He is not to be tempted, then. But he is in love with Mdlle. Selpdorf—with your future wife, and she must blind him. A man in love is easily blinded.'

'And Rallywood?' asked Elmur.

'We don't—want Rallywood,' rejoined Sagan, with an odd glance at Elmur. 'I can manage him, if you will leave him to me.'

Elmur smiled.

'I conclude Rallywood is capable of taking care of himself.'

The Count grinned.

'Exactly what I believed you would think. There remains only Colendorp. But Colendorp is the man we must have—all will depend on Colendorp.'

'Do you suppose he will bend?'

'If not he must break! But, no; I know him well! I have chosen him because he touches no woman! Men who don't love women, love money, and men who do——'

'Love both,' said Elmur quietly.

'To-morrow night Colendorp shall be here with me. You also will be present. Colendorp is a poor

man—as men go in the Guard—and we must approach him softly and by degrees,' said Sagan.

Elmur concealed a smile. A course of softness and caution seemed impossible in connection with the headstrong old man who counselled it.

Sagan, left alone, stood engrossed in thought. The wild beast instinct in him gave him intuition of danger. Elmur was playing Germany's game, but since his aim was the Count's own, it was impossible at this stage to disentangle the precise cause of suspicion.

CHAPTER XI.

A COUNSEL OF EXPEDIENCY.

THE foundation of the family and Castle of Sagan was said to belong to the period of the Frankish incursions. Some one had once remarked that Count Simon himself was the most perfect relic of the barbaric period to be found in Europe, which, coming round in due time to Count Simon, the joker paid with his life for his poor attempt at wit.

However true this tradition of Sagan might be, the Castle itself was mediæval, and, though it had been added to and restored, dark and tortuous passages still existed in the older portion of its huge bulk, and could by no means be improved away. Treacherous steps waylaid and betrayed the unwary foot; undreamed-of doors gave upon their dimmest corners, and not all the efforts of the nervous châtelaine ever accomplished the adequate lighting of their recesses.

The spirit of fear seemed to be abroad in the Castle that night, and the guests moved with a causeless but irresistible hurry when coming or going from the upper apartments or through the winding corridors.

Valerie was conscious of it, as, wrapped in a long

cloak, she opened her door and started back on finding a tall high-shouldered figure standing outside.

'Take my arm, Mademoiselle, I beg of you.' von Elmur bent his head, speaking urgently: 'I am aware that his August Impertinence well deserved your rebuke! But many heard it, and by some a sinister construction has been put upon it. For your father's sake, will you condescend to listen to me?'

Valerie withdrew her hand from his arm with a swift movement, but he caught and replaced it almost roughly.

'Forgive me, Mademoiselle, you must listen to me! I am not urging my suit upon you—I will not urge it until you consult your father; but, in the meantime, the exigencies of the case, difficulties which have arisen as the result of your own words, make it essential for you to follow my advice. You are aware, you must be aware, of my feelings towards you, and may I remind you that your father's wishes coincide with mine? Will you allow me to announce our betrothal to the Count? I will never presume upon this favour in the future—you may rely upon me. Valerie, you see I am using no lover's persuasiveness, I do not tell you that I adore you—though you are well aware of that! I only declare that your falling in with my request may mean the difference between life and death to some of us!'

'Is my father in danger through my fault?'

His hand held hers close, and she could see that he was moved out of the common by some emotion, the cool stillness of his manner was replaced by a passion of which she had not believed him capable. Her beauty and the thought of losing her had a good deal to do with this disturbance, but the chief cause was the fear, that, after all, his mission might fail, and fail badly.

'I cannot explain; but I implore you to act on my advice.'

Valerie hesitated. Elmur was very much in earnest, yet it might be an attempt to trick her into a position from which she would find it almost impossible to withdraw.

'Do you wish to make this public?' she asked.

'No, no. That—pardon me once more—would be equally fatal after the impression you unluckily conveyed to the Duke. No; I only ask you to allow Count Sagan to believe that you have consented to become my wife. I beg you to do this—for M. Selpdorf's sake, and, indeed, Mademoiselle, for your own!'

As they entered the circle of brilliant light falling from the great lamp above Madame de Sagan's door Baron von Elmur resumed something of his usual manner.

'Then I may conduct you no further?' he said, turning in front of her to screen her agitated face

from two persons who were coming along the gallery.

'Thank you for your protection, Baron,' the girl replied in an audible tone, 'the Castle is haunted on nights like these, when the *tsa* cries around it.'

The door swung open noiselessly beside them, and Count Sagan stood on the threshold. By some instinct, without looking at him, she seemed to see his angry, questioning gaze.

'Au revoir,' she added to Elmur, with a coquettish ring in her voice.

'Ah, Mademoiselle, I live for that only—to see you again,' began Elmur.

Sagan cut him short.

'Tut, tut, Baron, too many eyes are looking on to permit of such endearments as these! Ardour in a betrothed lover is natural, yet——'

Valerie looked up and smiled miserably.

'Au revoir,' she repeated faintly.

With that the door closed behind her as Sagan led her away to his wife, and Elmur, affecting not to see the two men who were passing, strolled on singing a love-song under his breath. Unziar paused, then drew Rallywood with him into the centre of the wide lighted passage, where they could speak with more freedom. 'That settles more questions than one!' he said mockingly. 'For example, it settles a question which most concerns you and me, Rallywood.'

'Concerns me?' Rallywood flung back the words.

'Would you deny it? You are as deep in that as I,' nodding towards the door behind them.

Rallywood's answer came slowly.

'I do not deny it. Why should I wish to? Though regard for her has led me to attempt to hide my—folly. I see I have not been altogether as successful as I hoped. But, had I anything to offer her beside my sword, I'm hanged if I would let that infernal German have her!'

'In these affairs, my friend, the ladies equally make choice,' Unziar replied with a sneer. 'Besides, it is only a part of the—plot,' the last word was scarcely audible.

Rallywood turned on him a long, keen look.

'And you think that she, Mademoiselle, is in it?' he asked at last.

'I wish to God I could say not! But in the teeth of this conspiracy, for the sake of Maäsau, we of the Guard cannot lie to each other.'

Rallywood, being on duty during the evening, stood, according to usage, at some little distance behind the Duke's chair. From among the coming and going, from chance words and prepared speeches he gathered a thread of suspicion which had its use in the perplexing future that was rapidly advancing upon them.

Valerie, with a flush upon her face, was looking unusually brilliant as she talked for a while with Unziar, who, judging from the sourness of his smile, may have been offering her his congratulations.

Counsellor came up to Rallywood, and as they stood well away from the crowd, spoke openly.

'You have heard the news I see, John, and you are not nearly such a fool as you think yourself. She is a girl in ten thousand, and may, not improbably, make the exceptional woman I once before spoke to you about. I knew this connection was under consideration by Elmur, but the engagement did not exist a few hours ago, and the present moment is precisely the most inopportune which could be chosen for its announcement, hence it follows that someone has forced Elmur's hand, or that he is forcing the hand of someone, it may be Mdlle. Selpdorf's.'

'Will it be announced—publicly? The Duke, for example.'

'It is known already to half-a-dozen; what can they do? I had it from Blivinski, the little Russian *attaché*, as a secret. Russia is, like nature herself, the vast reservoir of all secrets; and not one is allowed to escape, except for a purpose. Yet I wonder how it will end. Look at her! How brilliant she is. But rouge on the cheek of a woman who habitually uses none means, in all cases—trouble,' said Counsellor, as he moved off.

CHAPTER XII.

ANTHONY UNZIAR.

No one could have gathered, from the quiet aspect of Rallywood's tall, soldierly figure, that a whirl of emotion was passing through his brain. Yet above all rose one dominant sensation—a vast relief. Counsellor shared his own opinion with regard to Valerie. Her daring words to the Duke had no serious meaning; they were only the natural echo of a girl's preference for a young and beautiful woman to preside over the Court, rather than the bloated rake who now lolled uneasily in the chair before him. He recalled the forlorn little smile with which she had accepted von Elmur's lover-like protestations at Madame de Sagan's doorway. Its forlornness had been lost upon Unziar, who had drawn but one merciless conclusion from the little scene. Close on the heels of these reflections a vivid recollection rose before Rallywood's mind of the first night he had met her. The lights and music of the grand salon of Sagan died away, and he was standing again on the ridge below the Hôtel du Chancelier, looking out over the glimmering lamps of Révonde, dominated, as always, by the regnant red eye of the Guards' Dome, and he felt once more that strange new

warmth and thrill in his veins which, at the time, he had believed to be born of an opening career beset with danger and difficulty. To-night, however, he judged more clearly; he knew that his dull life had been rekindled, and his ambitions had taken fresh fire from the dark starlit eyes Valerie Selpdorf had raised to his in the Counsellor's ante-room two months ago.

'Captain Rallywood!'

Rallywood started. The Duke made him a sign to approach. Then, rising from his chair, he took the young man's arm, and leaning heavily upon it, moved towards the card-room, meeting Unziar with Mdlle. Selpdorf on the way.

'Hey, Mademoiselle Valerie,' he stopped abruptly, 'would you teach my Guards treason?'

To teach your Highness's Guards treason is impossible!' replied Valerie, with a slight lifting of her proud head.

'The influence of a beautiful woman has no limit,' retorted the Duke.

Valerie's red lips trembled.

'Generations have already proved the fidelity of the Selpdorfs has also no limit. But I beg you to accept an apology for my foolish words.'

'But such words from a Selpdorf!'

'We have always been loyal, sire.'

The Duke shook his head sadly.

'But the world changes—what has been is not. And the first reason now-a-days why a thing should no longer be, is the fact that once it was!'

Valerie was almost as tall as the Duke himself, and she looked level into his weary eyes.

'Have we changed with the world, sire?'

'Not—yet,' replied the Duke bitterly; then, struck, as it seemed, by the intrinsic spirit of the young imperial face gazing into his own, he added, 'Though you tempt a man to believe in you, Mademoiselle!'

'I say this before your Highness and these gentlemen of your Guard,' Valerie said, her eyes flashing. 'May the Selpdorf, who ceases to be true to your Highness and to Maäsau, die!'

In after time events brought back the vehement words to the minds of the three who heard them.

'And I say, "Amen!" ' The Duke took her hand and added, 'Which proves, Valerie, that you have conquered your old friend, Gustave of Maäsau. Come, Captain Rallywood, half-an-hour's play, and then to bed.'

Valerie looked up at Unziar as she walked beside him.

"And yet you would not believe me?'

'Come!' was Unziar's reply.

She laid her hand within his arm and passed silently through the reception rooms beside him.

She felt that the time had come when Unziar could no more be put off by the little wiles and evasions a woman employs who has nothing to give to the man who loves her but a definite answer. Two luxurious chairs stood ready for occupants in the nook to which he led her, but he had no thought

to give to conventionalities. He stood before her keen and white, and desperate with doubt.

'Valerie, what does all this mean?'

Though only a girl in years, Valerie was a woman in experience. Experience, not gained altogether at first hand, be it understood, but such as a clever woman easily gathers from the lives of those about her. As the motherless daughter of M. Selpdorf, she had had exceptional opportunities. Thrown into the midst of a brilliant but vicious society, her eyes had seen more of the bare undertexture of life than was perhaps desirable; she had looked upon the shift and drift of things political with an ever-present knowledge that there danger lurked and waited; she had learned the uses of reserve, and something of the art of resource; and, above all, her womanly perceptions had taken on a strange edge of sensitive power, due to her father's quaint methods of pointing out to her the difference between the seeming and the true. By reason of this premature insight into the motives and stress of human existence she gained in safety and strength as her father desired; but on the other hand, she had lost the sense of happy irresponsibility that goes so far towards making up one of the sweetest essentials of youth. Luckily there is one thing which can never be quite destroyed at secondhand—the romance and illusions that beguile boyhood and girlhood, and the liability to be so beguiled still lived in Valerie's strong and vivid nature.

'Shall I swear that every word I spoke to the Duke just now is true?' she asked coldly. 'Although, of course, even that would not convince you!'

'No, I suppose not,' he said drearily. 'You spoke openly of your hope to be maid of honour to Madame de Sagan when she became Duchess of Maäsau—which can only mean one thing. Rallywood heard and told me exactly.'

'You discussed me with Captain Rallywood? she flashed out.

Unziar's glance darkened again with a new suspicion.

'Should you object?' he asked.

'As it happens, I should, particularly.'

He bit savagely at his moustache.

'What is wrong with Rallywood?'

'He is an Englishman. Besides, I do not care to be discussed amongst the men of the Guard!'

'How like a woman you put me off! I did not discuss you with Rallywood, of course, as you very well know. I asked him the single question as to what had actually been said. I knew he would not lie to me.'

'The Guard keep their falsehoods for outsiders, I suppose?'

Unziar liked this harping upon Rallywood less and less. He moved irritably.

'But that is not all. You have admitted that

you are going to marry Elmur. That also signifies —something.'

'Whatever it signifies, it does not signify that I am disloyal to Maäsau.'

'You have seen for yourself that there is a change here at Sagan,' argued Unziar. 'No German has ever been welcome here before. We can but guess at treason.'

'Hush!' it cannot be that, since my father has knowledge of it.'

This was an entirely unexpected development of the difficulty. Unziar felt the check, and even in his turbulence he changed his venue.

'It may be so—let that rest; but nothing can alter me in the belief that Elmur is the natural enemy of the State. Valerie, he can give you many things that I cannot offer you. But my love—No, hear me for once. You must hear me, Valerie! You know that I have loved you always, I don't remember when it began—I was a boy. But Elmur at the best must have loved others before you. Whereas I—I have thought of no one else all my life!'

'Why, I have heard differently, Anthony,' she interposed, with a smile that was a vain effort to temper the intensity of his mood.

He stamped with his spurred heel upon a fallen flower.

'I don't pretend to be a saint; I am what other men are. You see I do not deceive you even now. But give me the chance and I will prove to you that

the Unziars can be faithful. Valerie, give me your love! For God's sake don't say you cannot! Give me your love!'

'Anthony!'

It almost shocked her to see Unziar—cold and cynical Unziar—pleading as a man pleads for escape from death, with a terrible self-abandonment.

'Wait! Tell me this. Did you choose von Elmur?'

'My—we—it has nothing to do with that kind of thing.'

'I thought not! Then you will sacrifice yourself for an idea? You shall not!'

'Anthony, you are very good to me—you have always been. I know that if I felt for you as you wish me to feel, then you could help me. But I don't! As long as I can remember you have been my playfellow, my brother; but not more—never this! Anthony, I love you, but not—but not—You have been so honest with me that whatever it costs I must be honest with you. I can never do as you wish!'

Unziar listened rather to some far-off tide of thought, as it seemed, than to her words—thoughts that flowed in upon him and quenched hope.

'You do not love me; Elmur is beside the mark—beside the question of love—altogether. Then, Valerie, whom do you love?'

She gave him a frightened glance, and drew in her breath as one who parries a blow.

'There is no one'; then, added more firmly, 'You are mistaken—there is no one.'

'If that be so,' responded the young man sullenly, 'then my chance is as good as another's. I shall not give up hope! Remember that. But I have thought that Rallywood——'

Valerie recalled the coldness of the averted grey eyes, and the memory stung her.

'He hates me,' she replied with a haughty smile, 'as I hate him!'

'Rallywood hates you?' he repeated in angry astonishment.

'Yes; but whatever he may feel for me I return in full!'

'Valerie, then you love no one? Say it again.'

The jingle of spur and scabbard came through the flower-hung spaces, and Rallywood passed within a few feet of them. He was whistling softly as he walked along with an easy swing of his strong shoulders.

'I love——' Valerie began, and stopped short, for Rallywood turned in his stride as if he felt their eyes upon him.

'His Highness has sent for you, Unziar,' he said.

CHAPTER XIII.

LOVE IN TWO SHADES.

ALL the next morning the snow fell persistently, and Sagan might have been, as far as appearances went, a castle built in the air. Above, below, around, the snow eddied like a fairy torrent, beating against the solid walls and curling in curious ringed swirls about its buttresses as water beats about a rock in mid-stream.

But the dominant grey of the outside world cast no appreciable reflection on the spirits of Madame de Sagan's guests, with whom gaiety and wild devices for killing time were necessary and familiar things.

But to Valerie the same suggestion of fear and unrest that had oppressed her on the previous evening still held its silent sway over the place. She stood at the broad window of the main stair-case watching the swift atoms of snow drift past, each one by itself a mere melting point, but, in their millions, mighty. She shivered and looked round with an odd sense of apprehension, as if the vague blind storm outside had its counterpart in a vague blind danger within.

A tall man came leaping up the stair-case. He stopped beside her. She looked up at him, her deep eyes were full of some disturbing thought.

'Captain Rallywood, will you tell Major Counsellor from me,' she began at once, in a low, hurried voice, 'that, in spite of what he has heard of me, he must still believe Maäsau is the dearest thing on earth to me. Tell him that, if needful, I am ready to prove it with my life! He may make quite sure I meant all I said to him yesterday.'

Rallywood stood silent. The passion of her voice and speech echoed in her own ears and suddenly seemed all excessive and uncalled for; a blush—half anger, half shame—rushed over her face, bringing tears to her eyes. Why was it decreed that she should always, in some small foolish way, appear to disadvantage before this wretched Englishman.

'I will tell him,' said Rallywood at last, 'though I cannot understand.'

'No, you cannot understand! You are so cold, so self-centred that the feelings and tumults which trouble most of us appear as weaknesses to you. Since you cannot understand us, you should not judge us, we others, who, in our own spasmodic way, love our country as you serve yours—steadily and with a whole heart.'

Now, John Rallywood was perplexed. He longed to set himself right with her. Her very accusations, her readiness to find fault, which might have made matters clear to some men, only disheartened him with a renewed sense of her dislike.

'You hate my nation,' he said, after a pause of consideration, 'therefore you condemn me, not be-

cause of anything I have done, but on general grounds, putting the worst construction on—on everything. I wonder why you judge me so hardly?'

Valerie laughed, her red lip finely edged with scorn.

'On the contrary, you judge us! Who made you a judge over us? You regard us—you English—with that straight steady look. I suppose you feel what futile creatures we others are, with our shifting moods and passions, our little furies and desperations! Do you remember the night you joined the Guard—the night in the Cloister of St. Anthony? How I trembled and feared for you, I'—she laughed again—'I even wanted to help you! How absurd it all seemed to you, didn't it? I remember you were very cool and quiet, and I suppose you thought it very foolish—one of those unnecessary, extravagant emotions in which we inferior races are apt to indulge!'

'Stop!' Rallywood cut her short with a peremptory word, 'I will not allow you to say such things of yourself nor—of me!'

Valerie threw back her head with the slight haughty lift he knew so well.

'You are rather too certain of your own power,' she said.

'You say you remember that night?—not so well as I do? You think I am very sure of myself. And yet I have been mistaken on points that touch me

close. I thought that night when I knew I might never see the morning—I dared to fancy that we—you and I—understood each other—a little.' He waited, but Valerie had turned away; her profile looked exquisite, but cold, against the dark shutter as she watched the driving snow. 'So I was the fool after all, you see!' he ended lamely.

According to the immemorial fashion of love, they understood and misunderstood each other alternately playing high and low at every other moment upon the wide gamut of feeling, touching faint sweet notes that would echo for ever.

Rallywood's self-control was giving way a little, and she instinctively felt her power and used it.

'I wonder what you really think of us behind that quiet alertness of yours,' she said lightly, 'I believe I did imagine I—understood you a little that night; but I imagine it no longer! Perhaps I misjudge you now, but it cannot matter; you told me once you knew how to wait, and of course you are certain that all unfair opinions of you must come right in the end.'

But Rallywood passed over her many sentences to seize the central idea that appealed to him.

'Yes, I have learned to wait. I told you that everything comes to him who waits. Unfortunately a proverb is true often, not always. One thing can never come to me however long I wait. For me there is no hope.'

'I don't know what you hope for,' replied the girl,

slowly, as if she were choosing her words; but she hardly knew what she said, she was lost in a multitude of dreams, and her words but filled in the rare crevices between them. 'I thought that every man carried his own fate in his own hand.'

'A man can fight the tangible, but no man can struggle against the ordinary laws of social life. We may laugh at conventional methods, but even in Révonde there are some which must be yielded to.'

'I don't think,' said Valerie, 'we yield to many in Révonde.'

Rallywood saw a group of people advancing towards them. Valerie, with her changes of mood and manner, distracted him, and drove him on to say what he had resolved never to be tempted into saying.

'I am a soldier—only a soldier; I gain a livelihood, but no more. I have no luck and no genius. To make a fortune or a name is beyond me. And without fortune many desirable things are impossible.'

Valerie turned upon him a bewildering smile.

'I shall know for the future, Captain Rallywood, what you are thinking of. You will be thinking, for all those grave eyes of yours, of the fortune you cannot make!'

'Not quite that, Mademoiselle,' he answered, 'I shall be thinking of the girl I cannot win.'

Valerie found herself drawn away from him by the passing group. She was aware of a warm throb

at her heart, she was trembling a little, and the fear of the morning had temporarily vanished. For no definite reason which she could afterwards discover, she felt suddenly happy.

By evening the *tsa* had blown away the snow-clouds for the time, and a thin moon gleamed fitfully over the wide expanses of white. Remote, muffled in leagues of snow, and alive with hungry passions and unscrupulous strength, the Castle of Sagan did not, on that wild January night, offer desirable housing to the Grand Duke of Maäsau. He had yet some thirty hours to spend as his cousin's guest before he could return to his capital without showing suspicion or giving offence. A hundred times he wished himself back in his great palace by the river bank where the squadrons of the Guard lay within call. But he bore himself well notwithstanding, and although, on the plea of chill and fatigue, he kept to his rooms more than usual, his short appearances in public left in one sense nothing to be desired. He did not carry himself as a man in mortal anxiety, but was as dissatisfied, as discourteous, and as disagreeable as it was his custom to be.

Late in the afternoon Madame de Sagan retired to take some rest before dinner. Wrapped in lace and silk, she was standing in front of her mirror with her women about her, when the Count entered. At his first imperious word the attendants vanished.

Isolde continued to stare into the glass like one fascinated, for in it she not only saw the reflection of

her own slender white-clad figure, but over her shoulder the fierce face she dreaded.

For a long minute husband and wife remained reading each other's faces in the looking-glass.

She had seen aversion and menace in the Count's lowering face many a time before, and was at length beginning to believe the almost impossible fact to be true, that a man lived who hated her, over whom her beauty had no power.

The young Countess shivered in mortal terror.

'Simon,' she wailed suddenly, 'you are changed, —you do not love me any more!'

A broad smile flitted across the savage old face.

'You are a fool, but a very pretty fool, Isolde, and for that a man might forgive you many things. Now listen to me. After you retire to your rooms for the night, keep close to them, no matter what you hear. There may be a disturbance, and you had better have Selpdorf's daughter to keep you company.' His expression changed as he spoke of Valerie.

'There is danger,' she gasped, 'danger. What is it, oh, tell me what it is!' Her first fear leaping towards Rallywood.

He stared into her shrinking eyes.

If you ever hope to be Duchess of Maäsau,' he answered significantly, 'leave Valerie's lovers, Unziar and the Englishman, to take care of themselves. Keep your tongue silent! Remember!'

He caught her slender wrist roughly as he spoke and pressed it to enforce the command.

The Countess made no reply, but her fingers closed in upon her palms.

'Come, give me a kiss, and promise me to do so much towards making yourself a Grand Duchess.' He brushed her lips carelessly with his moustache.

The caress brought no response; but as he bent over her she whispered, 'Have mercy on me Simon!' (it was a prayer born rather of some vague instinct of danger than any defined fear); 'don't kill me!'

He put his thick arm round her and shook her impatiently.

'Kill you, Isolde? Are you mad? You are far more useful to me living than dead. Get rid of your silly fears, and remember—silence!'

Then putting her back on the couch with more gentleness than might have been expected of him, he walked out of the room. For a little while she sat listening, then opened her eyes and glanced about her. Yes, he was gone. But it was characteristic of her that at such a time her chief and overpowering thought was Valerie as a rival! 'Valerie's lovers, Unziar and the Englishman!' A score of trifles rushed back upon her memory; but no it could not be. It was one of the Count's amiable ways to suggest causes of jealousy to his wife. He meant nothing, for what could he know? The soothing conviction grew upon her that the taunt was thrown at her for what it was worth. Oh, how she hated

Sagan—hated his bloodshot, beast's eyes, his mocking laugh, his cruel hands, his crueller gibes!

She pushed back the lace from her wrist and saw the thin parallels of bruised flesh his fingers had left—entirely unaware, it must be owned—upon her whiteness. Ah, she would show these to Rallywood—as a proof that she was in danger, that she actually needed his protection, and so win him from his post, which to-night would become the post of death.

All her little vain soul thrilled within her at the possibility of triumph—of defeating the honour of such a man—of winning him from his watch for love's sake—of overcoming the scruples that had for so long a time stood out against her wiles.

And yet in her poor way she loved him—loved him as she would probably never love another. Some women are made in that way, they take pride in the loftiness of the height from which they drag men down. Then he must be saved, she told herself, at all costs saved! He would live to thank her yet. A thought of him lying dead in his blood by the dark embrasure that masked the entrance to the royal apartments flashed acrosss her mind. She stretched out her arms with a soft call like a bird's.

'Oh, love, love, I will save you!'

CHAPTER XIV.

HALF A PROMISE.

TEN minutes later a big emblazoned footman brought Rallywood a summons from the Countess, as he stood talking to Counsellor and the Russian *attaché*.

As he moved away Blivinski placed a bony impressive finger on Counsellor's sleeve.

'If he were not English, you could not trust him,' he said enigmatically.

Counsellor raised his bushy eyebrows, with a humorous glance. 'We have had our day.'

'Ah, my friend, you know most things. Also I know a very few,' Blivinski said significantly, 'but with your nation patriotism is not a virtue, it is a part of your physical system. You sacrifice all for your country, not because it is right to do so, but simply because you cannot help it; the good God made you so. Therefore this young man, in face of the supreme temptation of youth, may be trusted. I speak of these things now because you will remember, in good time, that those who are against you will not dare to injure'— he removed the finger to his own breast—'us also!'

And the little silent swarthy man slipped away

almost before Counsellor realised that Russia, the mighty, had given him a pledge which might prove of immense value in the uncertain future.

Rallywood found the young Countess crouching and shivering near a wood fire. She was magnificently dressed in rich tones of royal purple, that accentuated her delicate fairness and beauty, and a small diadem of amethysts shone in the pale gold of her hair.

She took no notice of his entrance, though she was acutely conscious that his eyes were on her. She was hungry of his gaze, and she believed in the power of her own loveliness.

'Jack,' she said at last, 'come here. I wonder now why I sent for you, but I am miserable.'

She looked up at him heavy-lidded.

There was concern in his voice as he answered her.

'If I told you all,' she went on, 'you would not believe me. I am now—to-night—in great danger.'

'In danger? Here? where you are surrounded by friends,' replied Rallywood, beginning to wish himself well out of it. Had there been no Valerie Selpdorf, or even had he not uttered those impulsive words which, to his mind, changed his position from the indefinite to the definite, the history of his life might have been turned into another channel that evening. As it was, though Valerie remained free as the wind, he felt himself to be in some vague manner bound to her.

'Nonsense! You know how useless all these friends would be if things went wrong with me. They flatter the Countess of Sagan, but not one of them would make the smallest sacrifice for Isolde, the woman. I do not know if you, even you, are my friend. We talked about it—long ago. But I have not put you to the test, and I—I often wonder if our friendship still remains alive.'

'I am as I always was,' he parried.

'I wonder if that is true?' She raised her drooping face again. 'I don't know how to believe you. Why will you keep up this pretence of—of reserve between us? You never tell me your troubles, and I suppose you have them, like the rest of us. We should be quite old friends now, and yet you are always so'—she hesitated for a word—'courteous. Are you ever angry, for example?'

'Very often.'

'But not with me, and I have given you cause many a time. If you would be angry with me even once, Jack, causelessly angry, then I should know I had a friend to whom I could go if I were in trouble—in such trouble as I am to-night!'

'If there is anything I can do for you——'

The quiet tone annoyed her. She rose quickly.

'If—if—if! Any man could help me who—cared.'

'I do care.'

'I wonder,' she said wistfully, 'how much you mean of what you say. I have no standard to judge

you by, because you are not quite like other men. But I owe you my life, and I sometimes think it gives me a claim on you.'

'I can never pretend you owe me anything: you were quite safe; no accident could have happened. You are far too good a horsewoman, though you were nervous for the moment.' He spoke with a careless affectionateness, for the young Countess in her helpless beauty appealed to him.

'Look at me!' she said tragically. 'Do I seem hateful?'

'You are a young queen,' he paused, and added, 'a young queen—seen in a dream! You are too ethereal to be of common earth.'

'I am of common earth like any other woman,' she answered with a forlorn little smile; 'I can be afraid and—I can love!'

'Afraid? In your own Castle, among your own people?'

'Yes, Jack. Don't think I am silly! It is quite true. You say you have not changed, that you are still my friend. You are my only one then! I must look to you for protection; I have no one else in the whole world.' She was very near him, her little cold hand had caught his in her vehemence; she looked apprehensively behind her, and then spoke low in his ear. 'I am afraid of my husband. He wishes to be rid of me—I have seen it in his eyes. Sagan will kill me! Do you remember the night of the ball, when I gave you the firefly? Have you

kept it, I wonder? I said mine would be a short life. It is true. Sagan is tired of me, and I—Jack, I—loathe him!'

'But——' Rallywood began.

'You don't believe me? See this!' she pushed back a band of black velvet from her arm, and held it out to him. This touched him more than all; the slender blue-veined wrist with the marks of those cruel fingers clasped about it moved him far more than the temptations of her delicate beauty. With an almost involuntary desire to comfort her as one might comfort and please a child, he bent above her hand and kissed the bruises.

Isolde clung to him with a quick sob of relief.

'Promise me, Jack, that you will save me! When danger threatens me I will send for you. You will come? You promise?'

But Rallywood was not in the least in love with Madame de Sagan for all his pity. He was again master of himself, and an odd suspicion flashed across him.

'I feel certain you are mistaken,' he repeated; 'but you have another friend who can be of more service than I just now, Mademoiselle Selpdorf.'

The Countess sank back into her chair.

'What do you know of Valerie?' she asked coldly.

'Very little, but——'

'Thanks! I know her better than you do. I don't choose that she should amuse herself at my expense.

As it is, she has brought most of this trouble upon me.'

Rallywood may have been sagacious enough on some points, but on this particular one he was a fool. He was not at all aware that Madame de Sagan with her innocent eyes and small brain was sifting him.

'But she meant to defend you!' he exclaimed.

She laughed softly, and if a woman could have compassed the ruin of a man by means of love and temptation, Rallywood was lost from that hour, for the rivalry of Valerie Selpdorf added the one incentive of bitter resolve that drives such slight-brained jealous souls to the last limit of reckless endeavour.

'When I find myself in danger I will remind you of the firefly, and you will come then, Jack!' she said, 'you promise?'

'When you want me, I will come—as soon as I may.'

'But that is only half a promise.'

'Yes,' he replied, 'but you know the other half is pledged already.'

She sprang up with clenched hands.

'What? To Valerie? Already?'

'No, Madame, to the Duke.'

'Ah, the Duke is well served!' she said sadly as he bowed at the door, but she laughed to herself when it closed behind him, 'Yet you will come when I send for you, Jack!'

CHAPTER XV.

COLENDORP.

As the night deepened the wind again rose, its many voices howled about the Castle and compelled the ear to listen. It volleyed yelling through the ravines, it roared among the lean pine-trees like the surf on an open coast, it swept round the Castle walls in long-drawn infuriated screaming that seemed charged with echoes of wild pain and remoteness and fear. The narrow moon had long since sunk behind the rack of storm-driven clouds, and left the mountains steeped in a tumultuous milk-coloured darkness of snow and wind.

Within the massive walls the reception rooms were closed and empty at last; the guests had separated and night had taken possession, but not rest.

Valerie, alone in her room and oppressed by the vague infection of wakefulness and fear, moved from window to window listening to the wild noises that were abroad, and trying to reason herself out of the conviction of coming danger, which held her from sleep.

She had thrown back the curtains from the windows. Her room occupied an exposed corner of the Castle tower, which stood on the edge of the gorge

through which the Kofn chafed its way to the plains below the Ford. A narrow strip of ground scarcely six feet in width alone separated the wall of the tower from the precipice that fell sheer away to the foaming water far below.

She tried to read but could not fix her attention. Her heart seemed in her ears and answered to every sound.

And all the while in the scattered rooms and shadowy passages the drama which involved her life was being slowly played out. Below on the ground floor of the tower Elmur and Sagan sat together.

'By the way, my dear Count, have you ever thought of the possibility of Captain Colendorp's refusal to see things in our light?' Elmur was asking, after an interval filled in by the noises of wind and water which could not be shut out of the Castle on such a night.

The Count looked up and scowled.

'Leave the management of the affair to me,' he said. 'Unless I were sure of my man, I should not be such a fool as to bring him here to listen to what I shall say to him to-night;' then he added as an afterthought, 'When once we have begun, Baron von Elmur, there can be no going back. Remember that! The game must now be played to the end, whatever that end is.'

Elmur pondered. Sagan was a bad tool, at once stubborn and secretive, cunning enough to recognise and to resent handling, thickheaded and vain enough

to blunder ruinously. And Elmur found at the last and most important moment that for some unexplained reason he had lost the whip-hand of Count Simon.

Up to this interview, by alternate effrontery and flattery, he had kept his place in the Count's confidence, and exerted a guiding and restraining influence over him. Now Sagan held him at arm's length, and was plainly determined to act according to his own judgment without consulting the German. The mischief had, of course, been done by the news of Elmur's engagement to Selpdorf's daughter, for Sagan, like others of his limited mental development, was sensitively suspicious. Hence the bond between the two men was weak, inasmuch as neither liked nor trusted the other, but it was strong, since both were tenacious and both had staked all the future on the chance of forcing a new *régime* upon Maäsau the Free. At this crisis, however, Elmur would gladly have hedged or masked his position, for he knew himself to be overmuch at the mercy of the equivocal tact and discretion of his ungovernable coadjutor.

'I cannot help thinking that my presence at the outset will make Captain Colendorp shy at any proposition whatever,' said Elmur again.

'Do you want to draw back? You don't wish to appear in the matter—is that it? By St. Anthony, von Elmur, you showed me the road that has brought me to this pass and you will have to stand by me

now! Also you are wrong about Colendorp. When he sees for himself that I have Germany behind me, it will decide his doubts—if he has any, which I don't expect. I have read the man. He is soured and ill-conditioned, the readiest stuff to make a rebel and a traitor of!'

What more Elmur might have urged was cut short by the entrance of Colendorp. He had left his sword outside.

He saluted Sagan in his stiff punctilious way, his dark and sallow face impenetrable.

'I am glad to see you, Captain Colendorp,' said Sagan with some constraint. Even he felt the check of the man's iron impassiveness.

'You sent for me, my lord,' returned Colendorp, as one who hints that time is short and he would be through with business.

'Take a cigar,' said the Count, pushing a box across the table, and also pouring out a generous glass of the liqueur, for the manufacture of which Maäsau is famous—the golden glittering poison known as *bizutte*.

Colendorp accepted both in silence, but took a seat with a certain slow unwillingness that was suggestive. Colendorp was at the best unpliable. His manner put an edge on Sagan's temper. He plunged into his subject.

'Yes, I sent for you, Captain Colendorp, because I believe you to be a faithful Maäsaun. You are not one of those blind optimists who say because Maäsau

has been swinging so long between ruin and extravagance that she must swing on so for ever. It is not possible!'

'I am sorry to hear that, my lord.'

'No, I say it is not possible. Changes must be made. In these days of big armaments and growing kingdoms, Maäsau can no longer stand alone. She must secure an ally, a friend powerful enough to back her up against all comers—a great nation who will make the cause of Maäsau's freedom her own, and help us to preserve the traditions of our country.'

Elmur half expected the soldier to point this speech for himself by a glance towards the representative of Germany, but Colendorp sat unresponsive and black-browed, and gave no sign.

'There is a party among us who advise us to wait until we are forced into a corner, and then to make choice of such an ally. But reasonable men know that a bargain one is driven to make must inevitably be a bad bargain. The only hope for Maäsau is to move at once and to move boldly before it is too late, and while we are still in a position to choose for ourselves under the conditions which suit us best and will best conduce to the preservation of our freedom.'

Colendorp listened without any change of expression.

'What is your opinion, Captain Colendorp?' asked Sagan at last.

'The only difficulty would be to find a nation sufficiently disinterested for our purpose, my lord,' replied Colendorp deliberately.

'I have found one.' Sagan indicted Elmur, but the Guardsman still kept his gaze on the Count. 'Only one small obstacle stands in the way of carrying out our plans—the plans, recollect, of the wisest and most patriotic of our countrymen. I need not name it.'

Colendorp apparently thought for a moment.

'M. Selpdorf?' he said.

'But not at all! Selpdorf is one of the foremost of my advisers.'

Colendorp shook his head as if no other name occurred to him; Sagan bent across the table, the knotted hand on which he leaned twitching slightly.

'You do not speak, but you know the truth. And you know the—the Duke.'

Colendorp's silence was telling on Sagan's self-control.

'Yes, the Duke!' he reiterated. 'He has never given a thought to the welfare of Maäsau. Its revenues are his necessity, that is all! If the ruler will not take the interests of the country into consideration, his people must supply his place. Do not misunderstand my words!' for at length a blacker frown passed over the iron face of the listener. 'My meaning is not to hurt the Duke at all; our one wish is to urge upon him the only course left for the safety of the country. To that end we must all combine. So

long as his Highness believes he can depend on his Guard to back him, he will hold out against even the most reasonable demands. Therefore the Guard must be with us.'

'I am not the colonel of the Guard,' said Colendorp quietly. Sagan took this in some form as an agreement with his views, some surrender on the part of the Guardsman, and he broke out into a flood of speech.

'No, but Wallenloup! A pig-headed old fool, who would never be brought to see an inch either side of his oath of allegiance, but would rush blindly on before the Duke to his death, and to the destruction of Maäsau—to anywhere! Colendorp, Ulm being away, you are the senior officer, failing Wallenloup. It is not outside the possibilities of the game that you would find yourself in command of the Guard when all was said and done. The highest ambition of a Maäsaun is yours if you will promise us your help in this struggle! A struggle, mind you, not of selfish motives nor for self-aggrandisement, but for Maäsau the Free!' He stuttered in his eagerness and then stood waiting for the reply.

'And if the Duke does not consent to—any—changes?' asked Colendorp coldly.

At this juncture Elmur interposed.

'The Count will ex——'

But Sagan was rushing his fences now like a vicious horse. Having once given voice to his

ambitions he had no longer the power to rein in his speech.

'By your leave, Baron von Elmur, I will speak! Colendorp, you are a man to whom the world may yet give much. Your one chance is being offered to you—here—to-night. The men will follow you if you give the word, and Wallenloup, well, Wallenloup must upon that occasion absent himself. Use your influence with the other officers. They are not to be bribed, of course, but in the cause of the country each man would find his services well rewarded. Think before you answer me, man! Duke Gustave is sunk in pleasure and has sold the country over and over again to the highest bidder, and only got out of his share of the bargain by Selpdorf's infernal cleverness. This time we will play an open game. With Germany to stand by us, we have nothing to fear!'

'And if His Highness will not consent to these changes?' again demanded Colendorp.

'Then'—Elmur laid a hand on the old man's shoulder, but Sagan shook it off—'then, Captain Colendorp, he must go—to make room for another who can better fill his place! Just as Wallenloup must go to give room to another and less obstructive chief.'

Colendorp's dark eyes glared straight in front of him. Had it been Adiron—Adiron, as true a man, would have feigned agreement and blown the pilot afterwards. But never Colendorp! He was narrow-minded, poor, embittered, scenting insult in

every careless word, proud, loyal, desperate. Mentally his vision was limited; he could see but one thing at a time, but he saw it very large.

Sagan's treachery passed by him in that moment of mad feeling. He felt and felt only the deadly affront offered to him of all the officers of the Guard —the coarse bribe of the colonelcy dangled before his starving nose, for he alone of all the Guard had been deemed corruptible! The thought held more than the bitterness of death.

He looked from wall to wall, and knew himself an unarmed man, so he made ready to die as a soldier and a gentleman. But first he must clear his tarnished honour—tarnished with the foul proposal made to him by Count Simon of Sagan. He had passed through life a cold and, in his own sense of the word, an honourable man, disliked, feared and avoided outside his own most intimate circle. He had been driven by the irresistible destiny of character to live a lonely man, and now the strength of a lonely man was his—the strength that can make an unknown death a glory for the sake of honour, not honours. So he spoke.

'You were very good, Count Sagan, to make choice of me before all the Guard for—this!' he said in his cold voice; 'may I ask why you so favoured me?'

'Because I can read a man.'

'And you read me so? Then hear me. I take the place you have given me. I take my place as

the least staunch of all the Guard. You have told me so much, unmasked so clearly what you intend to do, that, unless I fall in with your wishes, I can never hope to leave this room except feet foremost. I say this. Now see me act as the least staunch of the Guard!'

Without warning he leaped upon Sagan, hurling him backwards with the force of the sudden impact, and buried his fingers in the grey bristling beard. He had but his bare hands with which to slay the enemy of the Duke, and used them with the strength of envenomed pride. Sagan, under the iron throttling fingers snatched at his hunting-knife and stabbed fiercely upwards between the bent arms at the Guardsman's throat.

Inside the room the heavy breathing and struggling of the men on the floor seemed to Elmur loud enough to alarm the whole Castle, in spite of the furious screaming of the gale. He sprang to the writhing heap and tried to pinion Colendorp, but as he touched him the wounded man fell back. In a moment Sagan was on his feet calling on Elmur to bring the lamp. He seized Colendorp under the arm and shoved him roughly towards the wall, where throwing back a curtain he opened a door and thrust the tottering figure before him down a short flight of steps. Then another door was opened and the *tsa* swept in with a wild yell, for a moment holding upright the failing man who staggered out on to the

snowy terrace, making a tragic centre to the flickering path of light cast by the lamp in Elmur's hand.

For an instant Colendorp stood swaying on the yielding snow by the edge of the precipice, and as he swayed his voice climbed through his broken throat—

'Maäsau the Free! Long live the Duke! The Duke's man . . . I . . . Colendorp of . . . '

The wind had lulled for a second. Again the mad blast caught and wrenched Colendorp's figure, the snow gave between his feet, and he plunged forward heavily into the gorge of the Kofn river. The broken snow, whirled up in a great cloud by the eddying gusts, shone in the lamplight for a second like a wild toss of spray, then settled again upon the narrow terrace, obliterating all marks there. A window overhead was pushed open, but already the band of light upon the snow was gone, and nothing remained for Valerie's eyes but a chaos of gloom. Yet she had seen something. Dimly through the double glass she had discerned the green and gold of the Guard on the swaying figure before it dropped away for ever into the night.

CHAPTER XVI.

'WITH YOUR LIPS TO THE HURT.'

A FEW minutes later a knocking came to Madame de Sagan's door. It was low and urgent. She ran to open it, her heart in her throat. A hand pushed her aside with the rough careless force of full control. She recoiled with an exclamation, for a glance showed her that the Count was in one of his most deadly moods.

'What have you done—where is Selpdorf's daughter?' he snarled.

As Madame de Sagan shrank from the menacing hand the door opened a second time, and Valerie herself stumbled in with a bloodless face.

At the sight of the Count, she drew herself together like one who faces an unexpected peril.

'I apologise for coming, but I am frightened. The storm is dreadful. So I came to you, Isolde.'

Isolde put out her arms with a sobbing cry.

'I am frightened, too,' she said with a swift resentful glance at her husband; 'I was coming for you. Stay with me, Valerie; I will not be left alone!'

Sagan looked from one to the other of the two beautiful faces, and a sensation of surprised dismay, to which he was a stranger, arose in his mind.

Hitherto women had been to him possessions, not problems. Now a very ancient truth burst in upon him with all the force of a revelation. To own a woman is not always to understand her. The unexpected defiance on his wife's face confounded him.

'Isolde!' he began, stepping towards her.

But the young Countess clung to Valerie.

'Stay with me, Valerie!' she implored. 'I am far more frightened than you, for I know what there is to fear.'

With a loud curse of bewilderment he strode out, banging the door behind him. Isolde sprang to it, slipping the bolts with trembling fingers. Then she threw herself upon a couch and broke into pitiful sobbing.

Valerie stood looking down at her in an agony of suspense, yet remembering that self-control is the chief rule of every game. Presently she put her hand on Isolde's shoulder. The young Countess started up with a suppressed scream. 'I had forgotten you were there. Valerie, he will murder me! He hates me! Oh, I have no one to save me!'

Valerie looked round. After the scene she had just witnessed, this suggestion did not sound so wild as it would have done at another time.

'You are nervous, Isolde; one could fancy anything on such a night,' she said soothingly.

'Have you lived so long in Maäsau without knowing that here at Sagan everything is possible? He threatens me, and oh, my God, what shall I do?'

Valerie sat down beside her and put a steady hand upon her arm. She had her own object in this visit, but it must be approached with caution.

'I am here. I will help you!' she said reassuringly.

Isolde sat up and put her arm round her companion's shoulders.

'I must trust you—though—— Valerie, there is one person who might be able to help me to-night,' she whispered close to the girl's ear. 'He might save me. But he must come to me—here—now! I dare not leave this room. Simon——' she shivered.

'Who is it?' a new coldness crept into Valerie's voice as she listened.

'Can you not guess? It is Captain Rallywood.'

Valerie had braced herself to meet this, and it only added proof to her own fears for his safety. Come what might, she would undertake any message from Isolde to get the opportunity of warning the Duke's guard of the coming danger, and to tell the fate of that gallant figure tossing to and fro in the battering rush of the Kofn. She drew herself away from Isolde's embrace with a shudder.

'What is the matter with you?' Isolde peered up at her with a quick scrutiny. 'You are shaking all over. Valerie, is it because of him?'

'I am very cold, returned the girl with a smile. 'I am quite willing to bring—Captain Rallywood. But where is he?'

'He is on guard in the Duke's ante-room.' She turned her head away.

'Then, Isolde, you know it is impossible! He cannot come!'

'Even if it costs my life?' said the Countess bitterly. 'Oh, how cheap you hold other people's lives, Valerie! You are a true Maäsaun!'

Valerie thought a moment. The request of Madame de Sagan fell in with her own plan. It would enable her to solve the doubt that was agonising her; yet if she found him safe, how could she lend herself to tempt him to his own dishonour? A cruel question rose within her. Should she put him to the supreme test of life and love—would she not rather know him dead in the cold river, than living and false to her dim ideal of him?

'There is no time to spare.' Isolde's voice broke in upon her. 'If you could make him know the danger I stand in, he must come! Remind him of his promise to me.'

'But if he will not come?' Valerie forced the words.

'Then ask him to give you the cigarette case of Maäsaun leatherwork. That will remind him of many things. But he will come,' she ended more confidently.

Valerie rose.

'I am ready. I know the passages are watched. I saw no one, yet I felt the shadows were full of eyes. Lend me your sable cloak, Isolde; everyone

will recognize that, and with this lace about my head, I shall be free to go where I please as the Countess Sagan.'

'Valerie'—Madame de Sagan held the girl back —'listen to me, you must make him come! I must tell you all. Rallywood is in danger, nothing can save him unless you separate him from the Duke ——' she stopped panting, then bared her arm. 'Remind him how he promised me—with his lips upon the hurt! Now go!'

The next second Valerie Selpdorf found herself alone in the dim corridor, in which the lights burned low. She stood quite still, the shock of the last sentence 'with his lips upon the hurt' still ringing in her ears. Rallywood! Rallywood with the clear grey eyes and that look in them which remained persistently in her memory. Her father had taught her to suspect the whole world. But she had chosen to think differently of this man, even when she told herself she hated him. Different from others—exempt from the universal stain of hypocrisy—one to be trusted, if it were possible to trust any. Then she turned upon herself. After all had he deceived her, had she not rather deceived herself? He had spoken openly to her of his despairing secret, of the woman he could never hope to win. And she had concluded what? Nothing definite, but there had been a dim thought. Oh, it was unbearable! But why did she linger to think of this, while Maäsau itself was in danger.

She hurried along the passages, moving with a soft swiftness of silken garments, and as she passed the hidden eyes of the watchers looked out after the muffled figure. Madame de Sagan was free to come and go.

From the head of the great staircase a narrow corridor branched away to the Duke's quarters. A very dim light shone from the embrasure at the end as she hurried along and, before she could stop herself, she ran right into the arms of a tall man who was coming out towards her.

He put her gently back against the wall and looked at her, but the lace was drawn close about her face.

'I must pass,' she said.

The man's back was to the light, but she knew the shape of the head and shoulders.

'No one can pass, Madame.'

The relief of knowing Rallywood was safe jarred in her mind with the hideous suspicion that Isolde's allurements had after all conquered his allegiance to the Duke. He clearly recognised the cloak and believed her to be the Countess. She would have been more than woman not to take advantage of the mistake. She bent forward a little.

'Come with me,' she whispered.

'I cannot.'

'Do you forget your promise?'

'Under the circumstances'—he glanced back at the Duke's door—'you know I could make none.'

'But I am in danger—and you promised, surely you promised, with your lips there!'

Rallywood stared at the shapely hand and firm white wrist thrust out from the dark sables, with a great leap at his heart. The sight took him unawares.

'Valerie!' he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XVII.

IRIS.

From its beetling crags the Castle of Sagan looked out that night with many luminous eyes over the crowding black pine woods and away across the frost-bound, melancholy marshes of the frontier. The renewed violence of the storm had not abated, and the wind moaned about the old walls.

There was one in Sagan that night to whom the wind had an old yet new story to tell. The Duke had heard it in his cradle even in the summer palace where he was born; during later years his dulled senses paid little heed to that wild singing, and, in truth, passing most of his life as he now preferred to do in the low-lying sheltered palace at Révonde, where the state apartments were well within the towering mass of masonry, and protected on the river side by the Cloister of St. Anthony, he seldom heard its voice. So that to-night, while the *tsa* whimpered and clamoured about the exposed buttresses and towers of Sagan, it sounded to his ears like the calling of some long-dead friend, a wraith belonging to his lost youth. Sleeping memories awoke and troubled him; he fancied he had read a vague menace in Count Simon's bloodshot eyes, and

every little incident that had taken place since his arrival now assumed strange and malign meanings.

He looked around the great vaulted chamber oppressed by a presentiment of danger, and tried to still his jangled nerves. For with the instinct of failing mastership he resolved to think out some scheme of defence and a spontaneous policy, by which he might not only defeat his enemies, but outwit and overwhelm his rebellious servants.

Selpdorf—was he also false and self-seeking? For more years than he cared to remember the Duke had forced this man to enact the part of virtual ruler of the State, always believing in his loyalty—if not to Gustave of Maäsau, at least to Maäsau the Free. Any dimmest doubt of Selpdorf's patriotism had never during all that period entered into the soddened brain of his master. But to-night, as the Duke recalled the half-jesting proposal to disband the Guard, made by the Chancellor on the day of the review, and added to that hint the pregnant significance of Valerie's speech, he realised that evil days were overtaking him, that his most trusted minister had been bid for and bought by his foes, and that it now behoved him to strike out a personal policy, whereby he should secure strong friends and supporters to aid him in the coming struggle against these traitors.

He had retired to his room at an early hour under the plea of weariness. He was, as a matter of fact, worn out by the flood of fears and anxieties

that Valerie's one reckless sentence had let loose upon him. So long was it since he had placed these weightier matters of diplomacy and government in other hands, that the renewed sense of responsibility and the imminent need for action seemed to be crushing in his brain. But the instinct of self-preservation, backed by the one kingly attribute left him —love of his country—strengthened him to attempt a final effort to combat the overpowering odds which he felt rather than knew to be against him.

Tossed and harried by a hundred terrifying thoughts, the self-enfeebled creature broke at length into that dreadful crying, the scanty painful tears, the aching sobs, which is the weeping of age or of an exhausted constitution.

When the paroxysm was over he lay back in his bed, absolutely drained of strength and of all power to think longer. Whether he dozed or not he scarcely knew, but after an interval he seemed to awake as if from sleep with his thoughts once more under control.

Oh, that he had his Guard about him! The Guard, always reliable and full of the old grim dash and power which had been the firm foundation of the ducal throne from the beginning. Amongst their ranks was no slackening of discipline, of devotion, or of that splendid recklessness which had made them what they were—the premier Garde du Corps of Europe! In spirit he yearned once more to see their plumes and gleaming equipment come dancing

down the sunny wind, and to hear the grand thunder of their charge, which but the other day he had been half-inclined to call stale and unprofitable. In this solitary hour, when the night-lamps flickered on the massive walls and the sense of loneliness grew upon him till he sickened at the unceasing cry of the pitiless wind, he realised that the Guard was the sole bulwark now as always of Maäsau. He shivered down among the soft coverings and listened apprehensively.

Unziar and Rallywood with two troopers watched in the guard-room, through which lay the only approach to his sleeping chamber. Unziar, could Unziar be trusted? He had heard something of Unziar and that handsome vixen of Selpdorf's. Then Colendorp—ah, there was no doubt there! Dark and resentful, his poverty and his pride were the bye-words of the barracks; he, whatever the temptation, would never fall from honour.

There remained Rallywood. He, too, was to be depended upon, the Duke decided quickly, though for no special reason but that he had taken some vague fancy to the Englishman's bronzed face and swinging stride. Yet Simon was powerful and unscrupulous; how could this handful of men oppose him?

He sprang up in his bed as the door opened and a man stood on the threshold.

'Sire, there is treason! Colendorp has been murdered.'

'Is it you, Unziar?' The Duke's voice came strangely from his pillows. 'Send for the whole escort of the Guard from their quarters.'

'Impossible, sire! The corridors are held by Count Sagan's men. Mademoiselle Selpdorf has brought the news.'

'What! You told me not two hours ago she was engaged to von Elmur. She is the price of Selpdorf's treason.'

Unziar stepped nearer.

'Mademoiselle Selpdorf has already risked her life to warn us that we are in danger. I'd stake my soul she is loyal.'

'Good indeed, Anthony! I'd sooner have your honour than your soul. But go, in the name of the Virgin, and since the corridors are closed to the men of my Guard, send the girl for Major Counsellor. She can but die!'

Unziar saluted and hurried back to the ante-room where Valerie and Rallywood were waiting. In spite of his personal horror at the thought of her danger, he was well aware that only by Valerie's aid could they hope to reach Counsellor.

Valerie listened to the Duke's order, then wrapping the lace as before about her head turned to Rallywood. He accompanied her through the guard-room and some little way along the passage. It seemed as if he could not let her go forth on this perilous enterprise.

'For God's sake, take care of yourself!' he said. 'If anything were to happen to you.'

The prolonged excitement of events, the sense of responsibility and danger, the exaltation of such a moment must have reacted on Valerie. Whether prompted by some instinct of coquetry, or betrayed into a touch of real feeling, or perhaps moved by the knowledge that death stood close beside them both, she drew her hand from his arm and raising her face asked in her soft voice:

'Do you remember what you said to me once—on the night of the palace ball?'

He saw the deep eyes upraised to his, though their meaning in that dim place he could not be sure of, but a rush of quick memories came over him.

'Yes.'

She gave a little excited laugh.

'Then expect me!' she said. And she was gone.

When Valerie returned to Madame de Sagan half an hour later she was still white and breathless. Isolde, in a fever of impatient terror, caught her by the arm.

'Where is he? When is he coming! Valerie—'

Valerie made a supreme effort to control herself.

'He is on guard.'

'Yes, I know. I know! But he is coming!'

'It was impossible! He could not leave His Highness. Isolde, you would not wish it!'

'What does anything matter unless it's found out?'

cried Isolde, giving in her adherence to a common creed. 'Did you give him all my message? Did you make him understand? Then, when all else failed, you asked him for the cigarette case? That would remind him——' Madame de Sagan spoke in growing agitation.

Valerie looked into her wild eyes.

'I forgot that,' she admitted.

Isolde shook the arm she held.

'You have killed him! Valerie, you have been jealous of me, and by your jealousy you have killed him! Had you spoken as I told you he would be here now—and safe! As it is he is lost!' she flung herself down among the cushions.

Her slender hands were clenched, her turquoise eyes stared wide and blind from her white face. She seemed to hold her breath as if waiting for the inevitable blow to fall. Valerie, greatly moved, knelt down beside her.

'What does it matter if we die to-night or a month hence?' Isolde spoke in a low voice; her heart had unconsciously been gathering up bitterness against Valerie, and she had no longer the strength to conceal it under this unbearable strain. 'Valerie, you have stooped to meanness—you who have so scorned meanness in others. You knew long ago what—Rallywood's love was to me. You have known my life, and much that I have to bear. Amongst all who pretend to love me there is not one like him, not one!

He would be always kind and true. I think these are English qualities, for in another way there is Major Counsellor——' the weary voice broke off as if too tired for more.

It was well Counsellor never heard that little expression of opinion concerning himself; it might have proved the thorn in a somewhat callous diplomatic memory.

'You have betrayed me! You!' she repeated with a bitter laugh; then, springing up, she ran towards the spot where her sables lay heaped upon the floor just as Valerie had dropped them from her shoulders.

'It may be too late, but I will go myself. I will save him if I can!'

Valerie wrapped the cloak around her.

'Isolde, I will go with you.'

'You!' Isolde turned with a startling look of dislike and suspicion. 'No, I hate you, and I choose to go alone!'

Valerie drew back and Madame de Sagan passed her by and flung wide the door. As she did so a confused noise could be heard, and the two women stood listening while a distant hubbub of voices rose louder, then a pistol shot followed by others echoed down the passages.

'He is dead! By your fault!'

Isolde turned upon Valerie with a wild gesture, as if she would have struck her.

Valerie drew back.

'If you really loved him, Isolde, you would rather he was—there—with his honour—than—here—without it,' she said.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SWORD OF UNZIAR.

THE Castle of Sagan may be roughly divided into three irregular parts. The massive old keep dominates all, standing high and black against the skyline; then the varied cluster of buildings immediately around its foot contain the principal reception and living rooms, and lowest of all the courtyards, kitchens, stables and offices. To the right of the keep a wing, curved like the fluke of an anchor, slopes down to a lower level. This portion is fairly modern and arranged for the housing of guests. The Countess's own apartments were situated at the junction of this wing with the main building, while the quarters assigned by ancient custom to the use of the reigning Duke during his visits to Sagan occupies the whole upper floor of an old and bulky annex that juts out from the base of the keep.

The passage leading to this annex branched from the head of the grand staircase. Upon the landing rows of heavily armed men were gathering noiselessly.

As Elmur and Sagan stood together waiting at the mouth of the Duke's corridor, the Count turned to his companion.

'Have you proposals ready to lay before his Highness?' he demanded.

'In form,' returned Elmur, touching his pocket.

'That is well, for you are about to present them. The Duke lies practically in my power at this moment,' Count Simon continued grimly. 'Gustave is a coward. The way to his presence lies open, and I think you will agree with me that his Highness of Maäsau will consent to most things rather than look the fear of death in the eyes!'

'There must be no violence,'' Elmur began.

'That shall be exactly as I choose,' Sagan swore with an oath. 'By the good God we can't afford scruples to-night!'

After a short interval he went on.

'Once we have Gustave's word, we are safe. He is too proud to own that he gave it unwillingly. Besides, so long as we win what matter the means we use? Is your conscience so ticklish, Baron?'

'Politics have their exigencies and are inevitably rigorous, my lord,' answered Elmur slowly. 'To be successful means absolution. In the political courts where our actions will be judged they make no provision for failure. Success is recognised and mercifully considered, while failure, my lord, not being in any sense public, falls to the level of ordinary crime, and is judged by the standard applied to ordinary crime. Thus you will see that I risk as much in my place as you risk in yours.' Perhaps this was as near an approach to a threat as had ever been uttered in

the ears of the fierce old Count. With a violent movement, he stepped forward.

'There is no hindrance in our path that cannot be cut through with a sword, and, by my soul, if we find one I will cut it!' Then, looking round, he gave the word to advance, and entered the darkness of the corridor.

A turn brought them in sight of Unziar's tall figure, standing sword in hand on the lowest step of the flight that led up to the embrasure covering the door leading to the royal apartments.

Count Simon pushed Elmur ahead of him while he fell back to whisper a few words to the man immediately behind; then he took precedence once more.

'I request an audience of His Highness, Lieutenant Unziar,' he said.

'Certainly, my lord, if you will give me the password of the night,' replied Unziar.

Sagan's answer was the countersign he had given to his own following in the Castle.

Unziar shook his head.

'You cannot pass, my lord.'

'What—not see my guest and cousin in my own house?'

'His Highness gave orders that none should be allowed to enter without giving the countersign chosen by himself.'

Sagan considered a second or two.

'True, I had forgotten. Come here, Unziar; your

trooper there has long ears; I must speak with you. Stand back, men!' he said roughly. 'Baron von Elmur, pray remain, and you, Hern,' addressing the man behind. Unziar still stood upon the step.

'Come here! I tell you, man, I must see the Duke to-night—at once,' continued Sagan approaching Unziar. 'What the devil are you afraid of? Unziar stepped down as the Count pulled him confidentially nearer to himself and towards the narrow entry. But while the Count whispered, a hand suddenly darted over his shoulder and seized Unziar by the throat, at the same moment when a well-directed kick from Sagan, delivered cunningly behind the knees, brought the young man to the ground. He lunged at Sagan as he fell with his sword, then it was knocked from his hand as his assailants swarmed over him, but not before he had fired his revolver into Hern's body. The man fell across him, but Unziar again swinging clear rose on his elbow and sent a second shot into the face nearest him. Meantime the trooper at the door was making a gallant fight, but the odds were too great. The struggle was soon over, the trooper's dead body flung aside, and Unziar, frantic and helpless, was tied hand and foot and left upon the bloody flooring of the outer passage while the Count's people forced the door.

This was a matter of some difficulty, but it was presently accomplished. The besieging party

pushed through into the guard-room, which seemed brilliantly lit in comparison with the gloom outside.

Most of the furniture and the screen had been utilised by Rallywood to make a barricade in front of the Duke's ante-room. A single trooper with his musket levelled knelt behind it.

Sagan, who held a handkerchief to his cheek, spoke loudly.

'Do you see who I am? Clear the way!'

At this Rallywood stepped into view from behind the screen.

'The man acts under orders from his Highness, my lord,' he said.

Sagan stared at Rallywood with haughty scorn.

'It is of the utmost importance that I should see his Highness at once. Inform his Highness that I urgently beg to be granted an interview.'

With pleasure, my lord,' returned Rallywood formally, 'if you will be good enough to give me the password, without which it is quite impossible for anyone to have an audience to-night. Our orders were very distinct on that point.

'His Highness could not foresee that I'—the Count dwelt upon the pronoun imperiously—'should desire one. Stand back, Captain Rallywood! I must pass and am willing to take the responsibility.'

'It is quite impossible, my lord,' repeated Rallywood without moving.

'You force me to extreme measures,' cried Sagan.

'Remove this man,' he ordered, 'as quietly as may be. We must not alarm his Highness.'

There was a clatter of arms as Sagan's followers advanced. The foremost of them ran in upon Rallywood, the swords met, Rallywood's sleeve was ripped from wrist to elbow, but his sword blade passed through his opponent's shoulder. The man sank down in a sitting posture, coughing oddly; his head dropped forward.

'Shoot them down!' shouted Sagan, but the words were still on his lips when the door behind John Rallywood slowly opened and a figure stood beside him.

Its appearance checked the rising struggle, for the figure was the figure of the Grand Duke of Maäsau. He was wrapped in his hooded robe of green velvet, and the five points of the golden star of Maäsau blazed upon his breast.

'Cousin, I would speak with you, but these fools stopped me,' exclaimed Sagan.

The Duke turned his shadowed face and spoke to Rallywood in a low voice.

'His Highness begs you, my lord, to withdraw your men,' said Rallywood aloud.

Sagan, scowling, ordered his men to the further end of the long room. Meantime Rallywood, with evident unwillingness, pulled away a portion of the barricade. Through this the Duke advanced with a stately deliberation, and walked slowly up to the Count.

With a sudden hoarse shout of triumph Sagan flung his great arms about the Duke's body.

'By St. Anthony, Gustave, no one shall stop our conversation now!'

The Duke made no attempt to release himself from the rough hug that held him prisoner. He merely raised his hood with one hand, so that Sagan, his coarse mouth still wide in laughter, could stare into the countenance not four inches from his own.

Consternation and fury swept over the Count's features. From under the hood a red challenging face, a big white moustache, and shaggy-browed humorous eyes met his gaze. The sight held him gaping. But only for a second. Then he whipped out his pistol.

'An English plot, by Heaven!'

But Rallywood was quicker still. A sharp knock on the Count's wrist sent the bullet into the ceiling.

'Have a care, my lord,' Counsellor said authoritatively. 'You cannot do as you will even in this lonely and remote room in your lonely Castle of Sagan, since England and—'with a bow towards Elmur—'Germany are looking on.'

Sagan still threatened Counsellor with the revolver.

'Can you see any reason why I should not kill you as a traitor to my country at this moment, Major Counsellor?' he shouted.

'Only one, my lord. Russia also, in the person of M. Blivinski, knows where I am, and is awaiting

my return to arrange for our journey to Révonde—which we propose to make in each other's company,' replied Counsellor pointedly.

Sagan burst into his habitual storm of curses.

'Your nation have well been called perfidious, Major Counsellor. A stab in the back——'

'Why no, my lord,' said Counsellor; our greatest vice is admittedly that we are always well in front!'

'Come, Baron, have you nothing to say to this?' Sagan asked, ready to spring at his friends in his torment of baffled rage.

'Nothing, my lord. You will remember I am here to-night entirely at your request.'

Sagan's laugh was not altogether a pleasant one.

'Put it how you like, Monsieur, I should not have been here either but for you!'

Elmur stood with folded arms. To stoop to recriminations before the common enemy! The cause was lost for the moment, but there was the future, and in that future the fool who figured as his ally should become his slave! Germany had, after all, gained something in gaining the knowledge of British designs afoot.

'Then his Highness refuses to see me, although he can give audience to—you?' the Count at length broke the silence.

'On the contrary, my lord, he looks forward to the pleasure of meeting you to-morrow. That is the message with which I am charged. Captain Rally-

wood, his Highness wishes Lieutenant Unziar to attend him.'

Count Simon made a sign to his men, and a moment later Unziar stalked into the room, maddened by the outrage put upon him.

'My sword, Count Sagan,' he said huskily.

'Your sword! Is it lost?' returned the Count with an angry sneer. 'In my day it was not the custom of the guard to lose their swords!'

'When I saw it last it was sticking in your cheek, my lord,' said the young man with a studied insolence, pointing to a bleeding cut on the Count's face.

One of the men, coming forward, laid the sword upon the top of the barricade. Unziar grasped it and thrust it back into the scabbard.

'It was lost by treachery!' he flung out. 'And I leave it to these gentlemen to say where the shame lies!'

With that he leaped the barricade and passed into the Duke's room.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS.

It was late on the following morning before the Castle was awake. It almost seemed as if the guests had waited for the appearance of the reassuring daylight before they ventured from their rooms. Four huge fires roared in the four great chimneys round the vast hall where the breakfast was in progress.

Sagan, in his weather-stained hunting suit and leggings, stood at the upper window overlooking the courtyard where the huntsmen and gaunt dogs, the famous Sagan boar-hounds, were already collected, in anticipation of the boar-hunt arranged to take place on that day. The sky had cleared, but the *tsa* raged and howled after its perennial custom about the Castle.

Madame de Sagan, entering later, cast a nervous glance at the grim red face and bull-neck, and then fell into a laughing conversation with the people round her, although her heart felt cold. She was far from being a brave woman, although she joined so gaily in the merry talk passing from side to side; but her marvellous self-control was no more than the self-control common to women of her social

standing. It is secondary strength, not innate but acquired, of which the finest instance is a matter of history, and was witnessed within the walls of the Conciergerie during the Reign of Terror, where men and women unflinchingly carried on a hollow semblance of the joyous comedy of life till they mounted laughing into the tumbrils.

Although nothing was known about the events of the previous night except by those who took part in them, a sense of excitement pervaded the party. The strained relations existing between the Duke and his possible successor gave rise to an amount of vague expectation and conjecture. Anything might happen with such dangerous elements present in the atmosphere.

Therefore when Rallywood, booted and spurred, passed up the hall, his entrance attracted every eye. He walked straight up to the Count at his distant window and saluting, spoke for perhaps a minute in a low voice.

At the first sentence Sagan swung round, his lowering face growing darker as he listened. Then, advancing to the head of the table prepared for the entertainment of the Duke, he called the attention of all present by striking it loudly with the riding-whip he carried.

An instant hush settled upon the room. Sagan glared round with waiting eyes, and in the pause the *tsa* broke in a crash upon the Castle front with the pebble-shifting sound of a breaker.

'I have to beg the favour of your attention for a moment,' the Count's words rang out. 'Captain Rallywood reports that an officer of his Highness's Guard is missing—Captain Colendorp. Inquiries have been made but he cannot be found. It seems that he was last seen leaving the billiard-room. If anyone in the hall can give us further information, will they be good enough to do so?'

Valerie raised her eyes to Rallywood, who stood behind the Count. As he met them the young man's stern face softened suddenly.

M. Blivinski, who happened to be sitting beside her, caught the exchange of looks, and for a moment was puzzled. Selpdorf's daughter? Well, well, the English are a wonderful people, he said to himself. Neither subtle nor gifted, but lucky. Lucky enough to give the devil odds and beat him! Here was Selpdorf laying his plans deeply and with consummate skill,while this pretty clever daughter of his was ready to give him away because a heavy dragoon of the favoured race smiled at her across a breakfast table. Pah! The ways of Providence are inscrutable; it remains for mortal men to do what they may to turn them into more convenient channels.

Then there was Counsellor, whose political importance could not be denied. Yet he did the bluff thing bluffly and said the obvious thing obviously, and blundered on from one great city to another, but blundered triumphantly! Still there were compen-

sations. The good God had given the Russian craft and a silent tongue, and a facility for telling a lie seasonably.

Elmur was by a fraction of a second too late to see what the Russian had seen. Valerie was very white, but she was talking indifferently to M. Blivinski with her eyes fixed upon her plate. It was some time before she seemed to grow conscious of Elmur's gaze; a slight fleck of colour showed and paled in her cheeks, and then at length her long lashes fluttered up and the German perceived in the darkness of her eyes a trace of unshed tears.

'Mademoiselle, you are tired,' he said with solicitude.

'Yes,' she answered smiling. 'But we are going back to Révonde in a day or two, and then I will wipe out the remembrance of everything that has happened at Sagan from my mind forever!'

Elmur was about to reply when Sagan spoke again.

'No one appears to have heard or seen anything of Captain Colendorp. We will have the dogs out, Captain Rallywood. Pray tell his Highness that in the course of an hour or two we hope to be able to tell him where our man has got to. His absence is doubtless due to some trifling cause.'

As Rallywood retired Sagan cast a comprehensive glance around the tables, and noted Counsellor's absence with a sinister satisfaction.

All the morning he had been speculating upon

the course Counsellor would pursue after the rencontre of the previous night. Most likely disappear from the Castle. He would not dare to brazen it out. Sagan argued that the British envoy could not be very sure of his position yet. What had he proposed to the Duke? And how had the Duke answered him? What was to be the result of the visit, or would there be any? Selpdorf held the Duke's confidence. He must checkmate England and openly throw his influence into the German scale. No half courses could any longer avail in Maäsau.

Here his reflections were interrupted, for Counsellor's big burly figure was bending over Madame de Sagan's chair, before he accepted the seat at her side with the assured manner of a favored guest.

Even the Russian attaché blinked. Ah, these islanders! What next?

As an immediate result Count Sagan was forced to accept the situation thrust upon him.

'Have you slept well, Major?' he inquired sardonically. 'No bad dreams, eh?'

'I dream seldom—and I make it a point in the morning to forget bad dreams if I have had any,' replied Counsellor, with a good-humored raising of his big eyebrows.

'That is wise,' said Sagan, 'for dreams and schemes of the night rarely have solid foundations.'

'So they say, my lord, but I do not trouble myself

about these things. A man of my age is forced to consecrate his best energies to his digestion.'

The Duke had decided upon returning to Révonde during the forenoon, but most of the guests were to remain for the projected boar-hunt. The hunting-party had already started when Blivinski and Counsellor drove out of the Castle courtyard on their way to the nearest railway station, which lay under the moutains some miles away.

The *tsa* had blown the snow into heavy drifts, leaving the roads and other exposed places bare and almost clean-swept. Near the station they passed a squadron of the Guard sent by Wallenloup to escort the Duke back to the capital.

The pair in the carriage talked little, but when the jingling of accoutrements had died away Blivinski said in an emotionless tone:

'You met with Count Sagan last night then—in your dreams?'

'Yes, or Duke Gustave would have been over the border by this morning.'

'Ah!'

'And history goes to prove that reigning sovereigns are fragile ware—they cannot be borrowed without danger.'

'You allude to Bulgaria?' Blivinski asked promptly, with an air of genial interest.

'Why, for the sake of argument, Alexander can stand as a case in point.'

'If—I say if—we borrowed him, we also returned him.'

Counsellor's reply was characteristic, and justified his companion's opinion of his race.

'Damaged—so they say.'

Blivinski considered the dreary landscape.

'We must not believe all we hear. In diplomatic relations, my friend, ethics cease to exist. Diplomacy is after all a simple game—even elementary—a magnificent beggar-my-neighbour which we continue to play into eternity.'

'But there are rules.... even in beggar-my-neighbour,' said the Counsellor.

Blivinski kicked the rug softly from his feet as the carriage drew up.

'One rule, only one,' he remarked; 'Britain loves to feign the Pharisee. We smile—we others—because we understand that her rule and ours is after all the same—self-interest.'

'If that be the case we come back to the law of the Beast,' said the Counsellor.

The Russian put his gloved hand upon the open door and looked back over his shoulder at Counsellor.

'Always, my dear friend, by very many turnings—but always.'

CHAPTER XX.

UNDER THE PINES.

It was a day that would be dark an hour before its time. Rallywood rode out under the gate of the Castle of Sagan as the last trooper clattered down the rocky roadway in the rear of the Duke's carriage, for upon the arrival of the squadron from Révonde he had received orders to remain behind, the search for Colendorp having so far proved unsuccessful.

Rallywood rode slowly down the shoulder of the mountain spur. Under the gray light of the afternoon the limitless swamps stretching to the sky-line looked cold and naked under their drifted snow. From the sky big with storm overhead, to the scanty grass that showed by the wayside blackened by the rigours of the winter, the whole aspect of the frontier was ominous and forbidding. Before he plunged into the lower ravines Rallywood turned to look back at the angry towers of Sagan. He was thinking of Colendorp. Under their shadow that lonely and reckless life had come to its close. Why or by whose hand might never be made clear, but Rallywood's mind had worked down to the conviction that the Count might be able to tell the story.

Well, it was good to know that Colendorp had

not died in vain; indirectly but none the less surely his death had brought about the defeat of Sagan's plot.

Then he rode away into the heart of the winter woods, where the branches groaned and thrashed under the driving wind. Through gloomy and pine-choked gorges he wound his way to the riverside, for he had decided that if Colendorp had met his death in the river, his body would in time be beached near Kofn Ford.

The sodden dreary paths beside the river, familiar as they were to Rallywood, now looked strange to him. He seemed to be revisiting them after a long absence. Had they worn the same menace in the past? How had he endured to ride for those six heavy years under the hills and up and down through the marshes by the black river, one day like the last, without a purpose or an interest beyond the action of the hour? He lifted his head to the gathering storm, thanking Heaven that phase of life, or rather that long stagnation, could never come again!

The horrible emptiness of the place appalled him. Only a few block-houses dotted the miles of waste. In summer, when the pools yellowed over with flowering plants, rare wood-pigeons eked out a scanty subsistence in the thickets, and there was little else the seasons round. Only the patrols, and the trains and the smugglers, with a boar or two in the forests beside the Kofn, and the ragged wolf-packs that go howling by the guard-houses at the first powdering

of snow. From the past his mind naturally ran on to thoughts of Valerie—thoughts that were hopeless and happy at the same time. He could never win her, yet those few dim moments in the corridor were his own, and whatever the future brought to her, would she ever quite forget them?

Presently as he rode along he came in sight of the block-house by the Ford from which he had gone out to Révonde to meet her—gone unknowingly! It lay in the dip about a mile ahead. If he were to return to-morrow to the narrow quarters he had occupied for so many months, the very memory of her would glorify the wooden walls, and even the old barren monotony of life with the frontier patrol be chequered and cheered by the knowledge that somewhere under the same skies Valerie Selpdorf lived and smiled.

The beggars of love—such as Rallywood—are apt to believe that in the mere fact of owning remembrance, they own wealth which can never be expended. But the day comes soon when we know ourselves poor indeed—when we find the comfort of memory wearing thin, when the soul aches for a presence beyond reach of the hands, for a voice grown too dear to forget, that must for ever escape our ears. Eheu! the bitter lesson of vain desire.

Between Rallywood and the Ford the Kofn widened out into a big bay-like reach, upon the further shore of which the trees gathered thickly, their bare branches overhanging the water. On the

nearer side ragged-headed pines stood in sparse groups, and amongst their lofty upright stems Rallywood presently became aware that a strange scene was in progress.

A small party of people were moving about the low-lying ground where the snow still rested. On that bleak site at the foot of an outstanding pine two or three men with picks and shovels were hurriedly digging in the frost-bound earth. Close beside them what looked like a long military cloak flung at full length lay upon the ground.

The meaning of the incident was manifest. The clouding sky, the river, the broken pine trees were looking on at a lonely funeral, darkened by a suggestive furtiveness and haste.

Rallywood put spurs to his horse and galloped down towards the burial party. Another rider coming at speed across the open sheered off to intercept him. It was easy to recognise Sagan by his bulk and the imperious gesture of the hand with which he signed to the younger man to stop. But Rallywood rode the harder. There was a shout from Sagan, and the men ran towards the black object on the snow, and by the time Rallywood reached them the dead body was already laid in its grave.

At the same moment Sagan on the other side of the grave pulled up his big horse on its haunches. The foresters stood rigid, waiting on the Count's wishes. He looked over their heads at Rallywood.

'Colendorp has been found,' he said with his most surly bearing.

Rallywood glanced down into the shallow grave; a lump of frosty earth slipped from the rugged heap above and settled into a crevice of the cloak that covered Colendorp.

'My men are burying him.'

'By your orders, my lord?'

'By my orders. Can you suggest a better use to make of a dead man?'

'No, my lord, but a better manner of burial.'

'Dismount and see for yourself.'

Rallywood swung off the saddle, and giving his horse to one of the foresters stooped and threw back the covering from the dead man's face and breast. His dead fierce eyes stared upward, his wet hair was already frozen to his brow, and a black wound gaped open at his throat. Rallywood gazed at the harsh features, which, but for their livid colour, were little altered by death. The *tsa* moaned across the river and a few large flakes of snow came floating down.

'Are you satisfied now?'

Rallywood stood up and faced the Count.

'How did he die?'

'You can see that. Suicide as plain as a knife can write it.'

'I do not think so,' said Rallywood slowly.

The Count's horse plunged under the punishing spurs.

'Captain Rallywood, may I ask what you hope

to gain by making a scandal in the Guard?' he asked.

'Justice, perhaps. Colendorp had no reason to take his life, my lord.'

'You will not find many to agree with you. The man was always ill-conditioned. He had debts and the pride of the devil. His affairs came to an impossible pass, I conclude. In any case a man has a right to his own secrets.'

'Yes, his affairs came to an impossible pass, perhaps. For the rest, this seems to me less like Colendorp's secret than the secret of some other man.' Rallywood met the red eye full of smouldering wrath. 'Pardon me, my lord, but in the name of the Guard, I protest against burial of Captain Colendorp in this place.'

'I have given my orders,' answered Sagan. 'The Guard must consider their reputation. We have had too many scandals already, and no one will thank you for dragging a fresh one into Révonde for public discussion.'

Sagan was amazed at his own moderation in arguing the question at all. He looked to see it have its due effect upon the Englishman. But Rallywood stood unmoved and stubborn beside the grave.

'We have murder here!' The words fell like an accusation.

Rallywood's eyes were alight now. It took little penetration to picture how Colendorp had met his death. Round the grave, Sagan's horse with its

heavy smoking quarters trampled and fretted under the remorseless hand upon the curb. The Count could bear no more opposition. His fury overcame him. Roaring an oath he slashed at Rallywood with his riding whip.

'By St. Anthony, sir, you forget there is room in that grave for two,' he shouted. 'You try me too far—your infernal officiousness—go! It is useless to oppose my wishes here.' Which was obvious. The foresters, lithe and strong as panthers, waited only the orders of their master. They needed but a word, and would as lief have buried two dead men as one in the grave under the torn pines. You may find the same type in the mountains of Austria, where a poaching affray means a vendetta, and the game laws are framed on corresponding principles.

'I see I can do nothing now,' said Rallywood, remounting in his leisurely way. 'The Guard must deal with the affair.'

But Sagan had another word to say to him.

'And I also, Captain Rallywood, shall know how to deal with you. Do not forget that! Your conduct cannot be overlooked. You will find that in Maäsau we are still able to get rid of those who cater for a cheap notoriety. We shall know how to deal with you! I am the colonel of the Guard. Are you aware that it is in my power to break you? Aye, like that!' he smashed his riding-whip across his knee as he spoke, and flinging away the pieces, he added, 'And by the powers above us, I will!'

Rallywood saluted and rode away. At once the foresters fell to work feverishly to fill in the earth over Colendorp's body.

Once more through the falling snow Rallywood looked back. Sagan's great horse stood across the low mound of the finished grave.

CHAPTER XXI.

LOVE'S BEGGAR.

A THREAT from Count Simon of Sagan was not to be lightly regarded at any time, but within the boundaries of his own estates it appreciably discounted the chances of life. Therefore Rallywood, instead of returning to the Castle, headed for the blockhouse by the Ford. The incident which had just taken place probably meant the closing of his career in the army of Maäsau. Personal power survived in its full plenitude in the little state, which had never made any pretence of setting up a representative government; the Maäsaun people were as mute as they had been in the dark ages and appeared content to remain so.

The future which lay before Rallywood on that winter evening was not enlivening. Less than three months ago he would have been half amused at such a conclusion to his military life as offering an answer to a perplexed question. But since then much had happened. That ill-luck should overtake him when hope was at its keenest, and when his relations both with the Guard and the Duke had reached a promising point, struck him hard. If he left the Guard he must also leave Maäsau. He had told himself a

hundred times that the daughter of the Chancellor was far beyond his winning, yet the certainty of losing her, which this last development of events involved, was the worst blow of all. To stare an empty future in the face is like looking into expressionless eyes where no soul can ever come.

He little guessed how close upon him were the critical moments of life, or how much of emotion and difficulty and strenuous decision were to be crowded into the next few days. A whirlpool of events was drawing him to its raging centre. The death and the burial of Colendorp, Sagan's resentment and his ruthless scheming were all eddies of circumstance circling inward and carrying him with them to a definite issue.

As he rode on the weather grew rapidly worse, and it soon became impossible to see more than a few yards ahead. The night was settling down thick with falling snow, so that Rallywood could only pull up and listen when a faint noise, that might have been a woman's scream, came to him through the storm. He shouted in return but there was no answer. Then out of the gray curtain a sleigh with two maddened horses dashed across his path and was as suddenly lost to sight. Rallywood had only time to see a woman clinging to the driver's empty seat and clutching desperately at the dangling reins.

They passed like a vision, noiseless, swift, and dim, and although Rallywood followed quickly, he could not find them. The gloom and the snow had

obliterated all trace of the sleigh, and at last Rallywood himself, well as he knew the country, became bewildered; but luckily the horse he rode was a charger he had had with him on the Frontier. He left it to choose its own direction, yet it was long before a blur of light which he knew to be the open doorway of the block-house grew out on the shifting darkness.

Within, the men of the patrol were standing in a group talking eagerly. Flinging himself from his horse, Rallywood entered the house just as a young cavalry officer came out from the inner room, and, recognising Rallywood, advanced hurriedly to meet him.

'I say, who do you think we have in there?' he said excitely.

'Tell me afterwards,' interrupted Rallywood; 'I met a runaway sleigh——'

'They were the horses from the Castle,' interrupted the young man with a nervous laugh. 'Mademoiselle Selpdorf managed to get hold of the reins after a bit, otherwise——' he snapped his fingers significantly.

'Then she—the lady is safe?'

'Two of them, my dear friend! One is the handsomest girl in Maäsau, and the other is Madame de Sagan herself! And, by Jove! she's an infernally pretty woman too. We're in luck, Rallywood! Have you come to look for them?'

Rallywood hesitated before he replied.

'No, thanks. I must get back to Révonde by the first train, so I will ride on with the next patrol to the station. Are they hurt?' he nodded towards the inner room.

'No, but how they escaped the deuce only knows! Madame de Sagan was insensible when we found them.' He dropped his voice. 'By the way, she has been saying some queer things! She declares the driver lashed up the horses and purposely threw himself off the sleigh when they were on the slope of the pine wood just above the Ingern precipice. She swears he meant to kill them!'

'She was frightened. That's all.'

'It was about a certainty they'd be dashed to pieces. And look here——' the young fellow looked oddly at Rallywood, 'she hinted that the Count——'

'Nonsense!' Rallywood forced a laugh. 'She was badly frightened, I tell you.'

'I'll take my oath there's something in it though! She refuses to let us take her back to the Castle to-night.'

'What have you given them—tea or anything?'

'Faith, no! I made them each take a nip of *bizutte* —far better, too. But we'll have some tea made now if you think they would like it.'

'Of course. It will give them something to do. By the way, you might as well ask them if they would see me.'

On second thought and in view of the Countess's

refusal to go back to Sagan, he felt he must offer his assistance.

'Yes, ask them if they will see me now,' he continued, looking at his watch; 'I have not much time to spare.'

The next moment Isolde's high sweet voice could be heard distinctly through the open door.

'Captain Rallywood! Pray tell him we should like to see him.'

Madame de Sagan was lying on a narrow camp bed supported by wraps and pillows, a brilliant red spot on each cheek, and her eyes darker than ordinary under the influence of the alternate fright and stimulation of the last two hours. She waited till the door was shut, then she put out both hands to Rallywood.

'Thank Heaven, we are safe and together again, Jack! Come here! I want to know that you are alive and this is not all a dream,' she began impulsively, yet behind the impulse lay a calculated design. She owed her life to Valerie's courage, but that weighed as nothing in comparison with the knowledge that in some indefinite manner the girl stood between Rallywood and herself, that Rallywood for some reason held Valerie in special regard.

Rallywood bowed, still standing by the door.

'Thank Heaven you are safe, Madame,' he said. 'I saw you somewhere this side of the pine woods, but lost you in the mist.'

'Oh, I did not see you! I saw nothing after that

murderer leaped off. I had a horrible instant during which I imagined myself swinging between the gorge and the sky—after that I knew no more!' exclaimed Isolde, a sort of complacency mixing with her agitation. 'They tell me that Valerie was very brave and that she saved our lives, but for me these heroisms are impossible!'

She glanced at Rallywood, secure in his approval, but he had turned to Valerie, who was sitting in a low wooden chair by the stove with her back to the room.

'It was magnificent, Mademoiselle!' he exclaimed.

Valerie shivered.

'There was nothing at all magnificent about it,' she said coldly. 'Self-preservation drives one to do what one can; it is only by chance that one happens to do the right thing.'

Isolde shrugged her shoulders and made a little grimace at Rallywood.

'Do not heed her, Jack. People are always very pleased with themselves for doing what other people call magnificent. Valerie is cross. Take this chair by me; I have a very serious quarrel with you.'

All the terror and peril of that dreadful drive had passed from Madame de Sagan's facile mind. The little rivalries and coquetries of everyday life occupied her as fully as if her lot contained no troublous outlook. In this conjunction vanity will often do for a woman what work does for a man. As for

Isolde, the small promptings of a wounded vanity at once absorbed her.

Very unwillingly Rallywood obeyed. Between those narrow walls one was within hand-reach of everything in the room, so that although he was beside the Countess he was not a yard from Mademoiselle Selpdorf.

'So you would not come to me last night?' began Isolde abruptly. 'You cannot be made to understand that we Maäsauns hold human life of very little account. It is stupid of you, Jack, but you will be forced to believe it now. Do you know that the driver of the sleigh——'

The attempt at assassination was horrible enough in itself, but from her lips wearing their strange innocent smile he felt he could not endure the story.

'I have heard of it,' he interposed hastily; 'the Lieutenant told me. But——'

Isolde leant upon her elbow to look into his face.

'What! You don't believe even now that Simon is trying to rid himself of me? Valerie, speak! You too refused to believe me last night. What do you say now?'

'It may have been an accident,' replied Valerie with a tired movement.

'Absurd! But whatever you choose to say, I will not go back to the Castle! Révonde is perhaps safe——'

'My father is there, and you will be safe,' said Valerie in a tone of quiet certainty.

Isolde laughed scornfully. 'I don't know that; for after all Sagan is the most powerful man in the state!' she cried, with that perverse pride in her husband that his daring personality seemed to develop in all his dependents.

As Valerie made no reply, she harked back to her former subject. 'I was in danger last night, Jack, yet you would not come to my help. What excuse can a man offer for such a thing?' her voice and lips had grown tender in addressing him.

'The Duke, Madame.'

'That for the old Duke!' with a charming gesture of emptying both her little hands. 'What is he in comparison with me? Jack, you are but a poor lover after all!'

Rallywood began to see that some motive underlay Isolde's wild talk. The kind eyes with which he had been watching her changed.

'It is very true,' he said.

'Jack, Jack, how am I to forgive you?' she swept on. 'Yet you remember when I was a firefly at the palace ball, I told you that like a firefly my life would be short and merry. My prophecy is coming true.'

An almost imperceptible alteration in the pose of the quiet figure by the open stove was not lost upon Madame de Sagan.

The sweet treble voice resumed:

'You took a firefly from my fan and told me that one always wanted the beautiful things to live for ever. Jack, you promised to be my friend that night. You have not forgotten?'

'I have not forgotten.'

'And the firefly? Have you kept that as carelessly as you have kept your promise? Where is your cigarette-case? Ah!' a pause, then a cry of pleasure. 'Valerie, come here! He dropped it into his cigarette-case and it is here still! If you had only reminded him of that——'

Valerie stood up cold and proud, and exceedingly pale.

'I forgot.'

'It does not matter now,' Isolde replied, taking the glittering atom from its hiding-place and holding it up on her slender finger to catch the light, 'since we have met after all. You meant to fail, Valerie! Were you not ashamed to deceive me last night—even last night when you saw I was desperate, and oh, so horribly afraid?'

Rallywood, absorbed in other thoughts, gathered very little of what was being said. After avoiding Isolde of Sagan with more or less success on the Frontier, he had, since his stay in Révonde, yielded in an odd reserved way to her infatuation for him, partly out of a desire to secure meetings with Mademoiselle Selpdorf, partly from a man's stupid helplessness under such circumstances. The more chivalrous the man the more helpless very often.

But all this was entirely and for ever unexplainable to Mademoiselle Selpdorf. He drew a deep breath. There was nothing for it but to accept the situation.

'We both owe a debt to Mademoiselle Selpdorf for carrying the message,' he said.

'You are mistaken,' said Valerie, and he winced under the contempt of her voice. 'I should never have stooped to carry it had I not had a far different object in view.'

Isolde laughed to a shrill echo. Valerie Selpdorf's haughty spirit was about to be humbled. She dimly felt why Rallywood held the girl to be far above the level of ordinary womanhood—a cold and unattainable star. But she should be dragged down from the heights before his eyes.

'I was not so blind as you supposed,' Isolde said aloud, pointing an accusing finger at Valerie. 'I knew why you went. Shall I tell you, Jack?'

Rallywood looked up quickly. Colendorp naturally recurred to his mind.

'You could not have known,' Valerie answered.

'But I did, though!' Isolde went on. 'Listen to me, Jack. Do you know why she undertook my message, and why she forgot its most important point? My life has come to-night to a crisis; I will not spare those who have been cruel to me!' Isolde was trembling with excitement as she leant forward, one hand holding by the table that stood between her and Valerie, the other clenched in the soft fur of the rug on her knees. 'Why? Oh, men are

so simple! They believe a woman to be pure and true if she but knows how to temper her coquetries with a pretence of reserve. Jack, Valerie has been false to me and to you because she is jealous of me, and—because she herself loves you!'

Rallywood rose slowly. 'Hush, Madame!'

Valerie stood for one instant scarlet from neck to brow, then the blood ebbed and left her of a curious deadly pallor like one who has a mortal wound, but she still faced them.

'Wait, Jack. You shall hear the end now that we have gone so far.' Isolde laughed again. She was so sure of her lover. 'It is well for the truth to come out sometimes, you know. Yes, Valerie Selpdorf, the proud, unapproachable Valerie, loves a captain of the Guard, who——'

Rallywood strode across in front of her. After such words of outrage, his very nearness to Mademoiselle Selpdorf seemed in itself an insult. With his back to the door he stopped and took up the last unfinished sentence.

'You have made a strange mistake, Madame,' he said in a low voice but very clearly. 'On the contrary, it is the captain of the Guard who has loved Mademoiselle Selpdorf, and even dared to tell her so, although she had shown him that she regarded him with scorn and dislike. I hope I may be forgiven for acknowledging this now, Mademoiselle. And let me say one thing more, that though I have no hope, though I am one of Love's beggars, the great-

est honour of my life will be that I have loved such a woman!'

The door closed behind him. Isolde sat stupified at the result of her stratagem, the stratagem by which she had intended to humble Valerie in the most cruel way a woman can be humbled.

Valerie, sinking down into her chair, burst into an uncontrollable flood of tears. The secret of her heart, which she had denied to herself, sprang up at Isolde's words and confronted her, filling her world's horizon.

'Well,' said Isolde after a long pause, '"We love but while we may." I wish you joy of his constancy. He loved me yesterday.'

Valerie raised her head with the old haughty gesture.

'As for him, Isolde, you compelled him to say it! But he does not—love me!' Her voice gathered strength. 'As for me, you shall know the whole truth; you are right—I love him, for he is a most noble gentleman!'

CHAPTER XXII.

IN LOVE WITH HONOUR.

REVONDE was drenched in a sudden and depressing thaw. From her crowned ridges down to the swollen river rushing at her feet, she stood shivering in a robe of clinging mist; yet the day was warm with the raw deceptive closeness that chills to the bone and awakens the latent germs of death.

From the Hôtel du Chancelier the winter view over the bright, beautiful city, glittering only yesterday in its winter bedizenment of frost and snow, was changed. Streams of dirty water poured from the roofs, and in the streets the miry snow sluiced slowly downhill or stuck on passing boot-heels in treacherous pads.

A thaw is demoralising; its penetrative power strikes deeper than physical *malaise*. With the average man or woman it damps the spirits, unstrings the will, and slackens the mental and moral fibre until resistance of any kind becomes an effort. M. Selpdorf was in the habit of saying that the rope by which the world swings is made up of the strands of the days rather than of the fathoms of the years. He held that no detail was too insignificant to be used as a factor in the conduct of affairs; thus he habitu-

ally took everyday trifles into account, since small items are apt to add up handsomely in the final figure of any calculation. A man who says 'No' to-day may be won to consent to-morrow under altered conditions of weather and diet. Therefore the Chancellor, who had avoided his daughter since her return, made choice of a dismal morning to bring his influence to bear upon her. He relied a good deal upon Valerie's affection for himself, which was strong and single-hearted. Moreover, he had trained her to the masculine habit of taking a broad view, a bird's-eye view, of the whole of a given subject, instead of turning the microscope of her emotions on any one point, after the manner of women.

Baron von Elmur was no longer young, but he was a personage and a figure in the political world. By marrying him Valerie would place herself in a position where her cleverness, her tact, and her beauty would be offered a wide and splendid field of activity. Besides, so Selpdorf imagined, she had no more favoured suitor.

Valerie was sweet and proud and sensitive; her father gave her credit for the two first qualities, but it probably would not have struck him to use that last term in describing her. He forgot that, in spite of any amount of masculine training, a woman remains always a woman at heart. Had Valerie not met Rallywood, she might never have known as much about herself as she discovered during her visit to Sagan; as matters stood, however, the weak

point in M. Selpdorf's theory was already under strain. The Chancellor usually breakfasted alone with his daughter. She was at once spirited and adaptable—adaptable enough to fall in with a man's moods, and spirited enough to hold independent opinions, an ideal combination in a comrade. Servants were rigorously excluded from the room during the meal, that father and daughter might talk freely together.

'I have hardly seen you since you came back, Valerie. I have missed you,' Selpdorf said as he turned away from the table and lit a cigarette. 'I am hurried to-day, yet I must speak to you on a subject that cannot be put off. One incident of your stay at the Castle has been constantly in my mind.'

'Yes, father.'

The unconcern of her voice struck Selpdorf. Things were either about to go unexpectedly well or else very badly.

'Baron von Elmur tells me you yielded to my advice and his wishes. In fact, you consented to an engagement.'

'Oh, yes, for the time being.'

'My dear girl,' he returned gravely, 'it has been publicly announced. It was announced the same evening, I understand.'

Valerie looked at him with a vague alarm in her eyes.

'Only by an unlucky accident,' she replied. 'It

was never intended to be announced. Baron von Elmur assured me of that.'

'I am sure von Elmur's intentions were most generous, but the fact remains that it was made public. Valerie, you must be aware of his feelings towards you?'

Valerie came round the table and sat down beside her father, slipping her hand caressingly through his arm.

Selpdorf smiled down at her.

'Valerie, I must ask you to consider not only your own share in this question, but von Elmur's. It compromises Elmur no less than it compromises you.'

'I cannot carry out the engagement,' said the girl quietly.

M. Selpdorf threw a great deal of surprise and disappointment into his countenance.

'I did not know you were so greatly prejudiced against him. But, Valerie, we are honourable people, you and I, and we cannot allow Baron von Elmur to suffer because we unluckily misunderstood one another.'

Valerie grew very still, her fingers pressed upon her father's arm.

'Nothing succeeds like success, and up to the present time von Elmur has succeeded,' he went on. 'But a failure in a love affair places a man in an absurd position, and to be laughed at means loss of prestige. Wherever he is known the story will fol-

low him. He has a brilliant future before him, a future that it might be the pride of any woman to share. I think, therefore, you will hesitate before you injure him by giving way to a girlish and perhaps passing dislike.'

'Father, I cannot!'

Valerie's voice was always low pitched and had the mellow sweetness peculiar to a contralto. But Selpdorf recognised a note in it now which showed him that his wishes were very far from fulfilment. She was loyal and steadfast, qualities that up to the present the Chancellor had found very admirable in his daughter. It is a rare pleasure for men of his type to be able to trust their womankind. In the case of his motherless girl, the Chancellor had enjoyed this pleasure to the full. To-day for the first time he found himself face to face with the less convenient side of the girl's character. She was an eminently reasonable person, and though she could stick to her point she never did so without cause. Therefore Elmur's affair promised to be awkward.

'What are your reasons?' he asked, after a pause.

'I do not—like Baron von Elmur.'

'That is unfortunate, but your dislike may be overcome when you know him better.'

'Oh, no!—never!'

'Why not?'

'Is it possible to explain a dislike?' asked Valerie rather petulantly.

'No, perhaps not—for a woman,' said Selpdorf

reflectively, 'but since there is no other——' he waited, then putting his forefinger under his chin, he raised her face and looked into it. 'Unless indeed you prefer someone——'

Her eyes, which met his with the clear direct glance they had not inherited from himself, and her pale gravity dismayed him.

'Speak, my dear child. This is a matter very near my heart,' he said quietly.

A tremulous smile came to Valerie's lips.

'And near mine—or I should not oppose you, father.'

Selpdorf pushed her away from him with a gentle hand.

'You don't know what you are doing,' he said shortly, and gazed out with undisguised chagrin into the mists that overhung Révonde. Presently he stood up.

'Well, well; it only goes to prove that the human element is a variable quantity,' he remarked.

'Am I only a human element in your plans? Am I no more than that to you?' She put her hands upon his shoulder.

M. Selpdorf drew her nearer and kissed her forehead.

'You know what you are to me, Valerie. I had hoped to join our interests in all things, but——' he turned to the door.

'Father!' the girl cried, 'don't leave me like this.

You don't understand. I only knew by chance. He is too noble to——'

'Ah!' Selpdorf recollected Elmur's phrase, 'There is always the picturesque captain of the Guard.' He paused before speaking. 'Then this noble individual does not propose to take my daughter from me altogether—only to entangle her in a sentimental embarrassment?'

'He made no claim upon me. He was compelled to—to speak—for my sake!'

'I will not ask for further confidences to-day, Valerie. But think over the whole of our conversation. I can trust you to be just, even to Baron von Elmur.'

M. Selpdorf knew that the longer an idea is brooded over, the harder it becomes to part company with it. Therefore the forenoon was yet young when von Elmur drove up to the Hôtel du Chancelier in reply to a summons. The German plot was not yet at an end. By judicious manipulation, Selpdorf had gleaned a dim knowledge of Counsellor's errand from the Duke, who was as wax in his supple hands. Counsellor's return had already become one day overdue, and Selpdorf took advantage of the delay to infuse doubts and troubled surmises into the Duke's wavering mind.

He had recovered in some measure the royal confidence, and felt almost certain that if the English proposals could be sufficiently delayed as to seem to hang fire, he might still be able to persuade his mas-

ter to enter into some provisional arrangement with Germany.

'You have not any definite news for me, after all,' Elmur remarked at the end of ten minutes. 'I begin to believe the Count's declaration that his Highness can only be driven into a reasonable treaty with us by——' he stopped and sketched rapidly on the paper before him, 'by—in fact—the flat of the sword, shall we say?'

Selpdorf turned a look on his companion.

'Could you trust Count Simon to put any man, and most of all the one upon whose property he has a reversionary claim, in fear of death? And further trust him not to put the threat into execution if provoked by failure?'

Elmur shrugged his shoulders.

'We should have Duke Simon to deal with in that case, instead of Duke Gustave.'

M. Selpdorf's round forehead wrinkled slightly. He was apprehensive of this new temper in Elmur. The Chancellor was too clever to be quite honest, and too honest to be quite unflinching. A man, in fact, a little weaker and a little stronger than his fellows. 'Then the Count's methods still commend themselves to you, the miscarriage of the plan of Sagan notwithstanding?' he asked with an invidious smile.

'If his Highness can be brought into a complacent frame of mind as regards our project to-day, and before the English proposals are laid before him, I

think we shall not need the methods of the Count,' Elmur answered. 'Count Simon has undertaken to help us on the Frontier. Major Counsellor will be detained under some pretext at Kofn Ford block-house, and later you, Monsieur, who have so consummate a skill in covering the mistakes of other people, will set this mistake right by a graceful apology. The fat Major will arrive in Révonde behind time—that is all. In the meanwhile, his despatches will be forwarded to you if you will select a safe person to meet the Count's messenger beyond the river. Later you can return them to Major Counsellor and score a point by the act.'

Selpdorf made no comment, but changed the subject. 'I have had a little talk with my daughter.'

Elmur laid down his pen and his impassive air became more marked than ever.

'Am I then to have the pleasure of an interview with Mademoiselle to-day?' he inquired. 'I hope she exonerates me from any blame in connection with the announcement made at Sagan?'

'Entirely. But she is inclined to insist that her consent was conditional—no more.'

'I only desire the opportunity of assuring her of my entire devotion,' said Elmur.

'I do not fancy that she wrongs you, my dear Baron, by doubting that.'

'There is then a difficulty on the part of Mademoiselle? It is unfortunate.'

'It can be overcome. She is still very young, and

her imagination has been touched. The Englishman, Captain Rallywood, has, as you once remarked the knack of making himself picturesque, which appeals in fact to the imagination. I am myself sensible of something of the kind when dealing with him. Valerie imagines him to be quixotic.'

'Has Mademoiselle said this?' Elmur was stiffening at every sentence. Circumstances and not liking had put these two men on the same side, and Selpdorf repaid Elmur's sneers at the helplessness of Maäsau with sympathy for Elmur's position as a lover. No man likes to be pitied in his love affairs.

'No, no, my good friend, no name was mentioned. It may be more convenient that I should never know it.'

'Then you think she may be persuaded to alter her decision with regard to me?'

'I am certain of it.'

'And what do you suggest shall be done with my —rival?' asked the German with a sinister inflection of the voice.

'We must break him.'

'Will it not be possible to work in this small affair with Counsellor's detention? Send Captain Rallywood to Kofn Ford to undertake the custody of Major Counsellor. Of course, it will not be necessary for you to mention the name of the person about whom your stupid Frontier officials are to make so convenient a mistake. When Rallywood discovers the identity of his prisoner, I fancy his

honour will find the weight of temptation put upon it too great. He also is in the English plot, remember, and he will co-operate with his countryman. He will allow Counsellor to escape. But by that time the Duke must have closed with another ally.'

Selpdorf comprehended that the German was playing his own game in a double sense. He was, in fact, serving his own private interests and also hustling Selpdorf along towards the German goal.

'Then we shall have a court-martial,' said the Chancellor. 'Disgrace will be more effectual than death itself in this case.'

'Disgrace? ah, yes! But I know what would happen to Captain Rallywood in my country.' Elmur's eyes had a gleam in them.

'I am not so well informed. Our State is more elastic in its laws than yours. I cannot foresee what will happen to him in mine!' replied Selpdorf smiling.

'There is but one thing that could happen to him under military law in any country. He will be shot!' said Elmur pleasantly, then added with a sudden uncontrolled irritation, 'And that too is picturesque.'

The Chancellor spread out his hands.

'What will you, my dear Baron? It is also conclusive. Besides, we shall have gained our point. The fellow's breach of faith is our point. Valerie will be disillusioned; for recollect, I pray you, that Valerie is in love with honour.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW RALLYWOOD HAD HIS ORDERS.

UNZIAR had already departed to the Frontier on a secret errand when Rallywood started for the Chancellerie through the slush and fog. It was yet early in the afternoon, and an hour when the Duke sometimes drove out. As Rallywood trotted along the embankment by the river, he saw the outriders of the Duke's carriage coming towards him.

Gustave of Maäsau happened to be alone, and, to indulge the humour of the moment, he beckoned the young man to the side of the carriage and spoke a few words to him. He took a pleasure in the Englishman's frank readiness.

'I have to thank you for your energy in the matter of Colendorp,' he began. 'We have, however, decided to leave the whole affair in abeyance for the present. So M. Selpdorf has sent for you. What for?' he added with the curiosity of an idle man.

'I do not know, sire.'

'Now I remember, he did mention something about—well, well, we have worse enemies in the State than the Chancellor,' he wandered on, for he had had an interview during the morning with Selpdorf, and was more than half persuaded to place

himself once more unreservedly under that able direction. For Selpdorf had almost succeeded in lulling his suspicions, and in luring him back to the old comfortable habit of believing in a false peace. He half regretted the doubts he had lately entertained of his Prime Minister, and was weakly willing to disabuse the Englishman's mind of prejudice. He did not know that Rallywood was quite unaware of Selpdorf's connection with the Sagan plot. 'The excellent Selpdorf is unsparing of his agents,' went on the Duke in vague connection, 'but he is also unsparing of himself. Therefore see that you obey him loyally. For me, he does what he wills with me.' He laughed and raised his hand by way of dismissal.

Rallywood went on wondering what the Duke meant to convey by this praise of his great Minister and in fact set many constructions on the empty words.

Selpdorf received him with an air of gravity, almost of restraint, entirely unlike the debonnair interest he had shown in him on the occasion of their last interview.

'I have sent for you, Captain Rallywood,' he said after a moment's consideration, 'to entrust to you a very delicate mission.'

He ceased and waited for some response. He was standing opposite to Rallywood on a white fur rug. The upstanding corners of his moustache, his upright carriage, and the ineffaceable mark left upon

him by his short term of military service—for conscription obtains in Maäsau—had their effect upon Rallywood. He picked out the soldier from the chancellor and saluted in silence.

Selpdorf smiled. Yet he wished the man had spoken! so much may be deduced from a tone of voice. Did he guess how much Selpdorf knew of his relations with Valerie? But there was nothing to be gathered from that rigid front.

'Before I give you any information, I must ask you first to say whether you will serve his Highness or not?'

'I have taken the oath, your excellency.'

'Yes,' the Chancellor said dubiously, 'and an oath goes a long way but sometimes not all the way. Has not some writer said that it is the man that makes the oath believed, not the oath the man?'

'I have taken the soldier's oath,' repeated Rallywood.

But he had no protestation of fidelity to offer. It rested with Selpdorf to choose the right man for his mission.

If personal inclination had had any part in the Chancellor's plan of life, it is certain he would have liked Rallywood. As it was, in trusting he distrusted him. Rallywood could be relied on to follow a straight path, he knew, but if it swerved from honour—what then?

'Also I must remind you that a soldier should see no farther than the point of his sword, and hear no

more than his orders. In short, under many circumstances he has no use for an independent judgment. He must leave that to those whom he is pledged to obey and with whom rests the ultimate responsibility. A soldier's single duty is blind obedience.'

Rallywood bowed and continued to await his orders in silence.

'That is well. I am about to send you to Kofn Ford, where you will meet the midnight mail from the Frontier. At the foot of the mountain incline, about half-way between the stations, the train will be stopped and a person placed in your custody. You will take this person back with you to the Ford block-house and keep him there until you receive orders to bring him into Révonde. I especially charge you that no violence is to be used, but he is not to be permitted to escape. The importance of the duty which is entrusted to you cannot be too highly estimated.'

This then was what the Duke meant. Rallywood was to place himself unreservedly at the disposal of M. Selpdorf. Yet the preamble troubled him. It seemed to be assumed that he might be tempted to evade his orders.

'I am to start at once, your Excellency?'

'In half an hour.' Selpdorf's face cleared, something of his former geniality returned to him. 'To-night, Captain Rallywood, the Duke has need of a man. There are others I might have sent whose claims are greater than yours, but you are my nom-

inee to the ranks of the Guard, and I would justify my choice. His Highness also is inclined to favour you.'

Selpdorf contemplated Rallywood kindly, as if prepared to be interested in his answer. He was trying to draw something from the man, but Rallywood only stood straighter and hugged his wooden silence closer. Any reply he could make would give the advantage to Selpdorf. For the present he himself held it. It is often so. The man who speaks ten words has an advantage over the man who speaks a hundred.

'I thank your Excellency,' he replied.

'There is,' Selpdorf began again meditatively, as if permitting himself the luxury of a little frankness before a trusted adherent, 'an end to everything and a beginning. The line drawn between the new and the old is never defined; the two overlap. We may regret the old, but since the new is irresistible, the wise make the best of it.' He looked up with an alert interest. 'In your own case, Captain Rallywood, you were not long ago at the dividing line yourself; how has the new life treated you?'

'Well!' said Rallywood as if flinging back a challenge.

The Chancellor's round eyes met his.

'Ah, I thought it would be so! You were half inclined that night to let fortune go by you. You must mount her, man, not lead her by the bridle.'

Then Rallywood broke silence.

'I doubt, your Excellency, if she will carry me where I want to go, in spite of hard riding,' he said.

'That will depend upon yourself, I imagine. Good-day, Captain.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE FRONTIER.

THE evening train was almost due.

Upon the rise of a bare and windy ridge Rallywood sat on horseback waiting. Man and horse seemed to be the only living things between the horizons. From his point of vantage he looked out over the dim, limitless marshes, north, south and west, and although the growing darkness rendered the few features of the landscape even less distinguishable than usual, his practiced eye passed from point to point readily, for the flat map before him had been etched in upon his memory by the slow-graving stylus of use.

The night promised to be clear and star-lit, for the *tsa* had risen to a gale, and a sudden frost succeeding the thaw had already thrust its iron fingers deep into the land. The cold was intense, and a raw wind, that had blown across a continent and a sea, came down obliquely upon Rallywood through a dip in the mountains. On one side the lines of the railway track ran up a curving incline into the Kofn Hills, where, five miles away at the bleak Frontier station, officials, imposingly uniformed, parade the platforms, examine the baggage, and demand pass-

ports in a manner calculated to impress the traveller with an idea of the immense resources of the State of Maäsau. That is one part of their duties. The other is slavish obedience. 'Do what you are ordered, and the result will look after itself.' Such is the creed. The first lesson taught them is that they must not hesitate, and they learn it thoroughly. Westwards the line slipped away into the sweep of low ground towards Alfau, the first stoppage on the way to Révonde.

Rallywood drew his riding-cloak around him and settled down squarely into the saddle. The desolate plains with the crying wind held the loneliness of the damned. Occasionally a wolf howled in the distance, or a wandering snipe cried as it lost itself among the stiffening reeds about the swampy levels, and through all he could hear the hoarse roar of the Kofn in flood, as it rushed down from its rocky bed, swollen with the melted snows of yesterday. Another interval passed while the gray outlook changed to black. Then a red light appeared as it were over the edge of the world. Its coming afforded a certain break in the naked whimpering solitude of the plain.

Slowly it crept down the incline, for the engines of Maäsau, like Belgian pistols, are not made for rough usage. Rallywood rode forward to meet it, the tufts of grass crackling under his horse's feet. But instead of slackening pace the chain of lighted carriages swept past him, and, gathering speed, wound away into the desolate night.

Rallywood looked after it with a sense of blankness. The Chancellor's exordium and the Duke's remarks had rather primed him to a state of expectation, and he felt as if he had been balked of he knew not what. The green light contracted and died away into the gloom; then discontent mastered him. In his restless mood he had grasped at the situation, which had promised a stirring of the blood, but the train passed and thrust him back with a hand that seemed almost palpable in the staleness of ordinary life. When he left the Frontier he had left behind him the old content, the humorous adaptability to circumstances which had once been a main element of his character.

Turning his horse's head due west he rode slowly beside the track, where the metals had begun to gleam under the stars, and the wind drove behind him as if driving him out into the waste. He rode on for five minutes. Then he pulled up and listened. Through the whistling of the *tsa* and the dull roar of the river, he fancied he had detected some other sound.

Puzzled, he turned and rode back at a hand-gallop in the teeth of the wind. As he rode, the noise became more distinct, and presently out of the night something black and bulky came jolting painfully and slowly down the slope of the railway track.

As Rallywood drew rein alongside, he saw it was a single carriage, unlighted and solitary, rolling aim-

lessly on towards the level ground through the gloom.

Gradually the pace slackened, and at last with a rheumatic jerk backwards and forwards it came to a standstill. By this time also Rallywood had perceived that it occupied the further set of rails, on which the outgoing trains from Révonde travelled. And already the night mail could not be far away.

He dropped from his saddle and in a second was feeling for his matches, while the horse fell to sniffing half-heartedly at the meagre herbage.

Rallywood mounted the steps of the carriage, for the platforms in Maäsau are very high, and turned the handle. Then, bending forward, he peered into the interior, but through the dusk the seats seemed empty. Rallywood stepped inside and lit a match. It sputtered in the frosty air and flickered for a second from the route-maps under the musty racks to the cushioned seats, and so downwards to a figure heaped on the floor-rug by the opposite door.

This wandering carriage had then one occupant. Also he gave signs of life, for he grunted feebly in the dark as the match went out.

Rallywood felt for the lamp above his head, for in Maäsau the trains are lighted by oil lanterns let in over the doors. Finding it, he broke the glass with the butt of his revolver and lit the wick; then he turned for a closer examination of the man who had come to him in so strange a manner. But the manner pointed to the fact that this must be the prisoner

he was told to hold at Kofn Ford until to-morrow. Politics are apt to work out to curious issues in continental railways. Such things have happened many times, though they are not often noised abroad. The man lay with one arm thrown across the seat and his face buried in it. He was a big man, and a fringe of white hair showed under the back of his travelling cap above a crease of fleshy neck.

'Counsellor!'

For an instant Rallywood turned sick and his head felt light. He remembered feeling the same sensation years before, when a heavy opponent sat abruptly down on his chest in a football scrimmage. His hands shook as he lifted the inert figure on to the cushions and scanned the face, sticky and disfigured with blood. After forcing some brandy from his flask down Counsellor's throat and unloosing his collar, Rallywood opened the window wide to let the cold air blow in upon him, and fired two shots from his revolver in rapid succession out into the night. They must have help, for the down mail was already at Alfau.

By this time, Counsellor, grunting and swearing, had got himself up on his elbow and stared at the young man with vacant eyes.

'Where the deuce have I got to? Is that you, John? By heaven, I remember!' His fingers went groping weakly to his breast, then with a groan he struggled to his feet. 'The ruffians have robbed me!'

But the effort exhausted him; he sank back putting his hands to his head.

'I don't understand this. What has happened? John, where am I?'

Rallywood explained hurriedly.

'We're on the up line, Major. Have another pull at my flask, and see if you can get to the Ford blockhouse. The night mail will be on us directly. Ah, there are the men,' as a stolid sergeant thrust his weather-beaten face in at the door.

Rallywood gave the necessary orders rapidly, then turned to the Major.

'Are you badly hurt? Do you think you can ride?' said he.

'Ride! of course I can ride. How far is it to Révonde?'

Rallywood put his arm round him, and helped him very tenderly from the carriage.

Counsellor stood up in the howling wind and looked about him into the wild night.

'I've had a nasty knock on the head, and I suppose they look to the night mail to finish the business. Make haste, John! where's your horse? Treachery's afoot to-night. I've lost my despatches —they robbed me of them! But I'll beat them all yet! Give me your flask. How far is it to Révonde?'

The troopers had dispersed, some to warn the coming train, others to arrange for the removal of the carriage from the track.

Counsellor had his foot in the stirrup, and with difficulty Rallywood got him up into the saddle.

'Thirty miles, but you cannot ride there to-night,' answered Rallywood.

'With your help I'll beat them yet, John!' Thirty miles? I'll be there before daylight! I can go by the stars once I find the road.'

He stuck his heels into the horse's side, but Rallywood still held the bridle.

A wild gust tore round them, and in the succeeding lull Rallywood laid his hand on the other man's knee.

'Major Counsellor, you are my prisoner,' he said.

'How's this, John?' the question came thin, pitiful and weak. A new doubt, the old affection, and a strange helplessness mingled in the words, and they cut deep into Rallywood's ears.

'That was a bad knock on the head,' muttered the Major apologetically, and sank forward on the horse's neck again unconscious.

CHAPTER XXV.

A QUESTION OF TWO MORALITIES.

THE road towards the block-house ran along the river bank past the Kofn Ford. They went slowly on together through the starry windy night, Rallywood with his hand on the bridle and the wounded man holding limply to the saddle.

The *tsa* raved and rocked in the pine trees, through the pauses of the storm a wolf barked, and the black, tumbled water was still swelling and gulping under the low stars. But the tumult of noises only served to accentuate the hideous loneliness which is the salient characteristic of the Frontier.

Counsellor, with an unaccustomed warfare in his heart—rage and the pity of it working together—stared into space across the leaping river.

As the two men drew near the ford, they saw the dim figure of a horseman riding down the bank on the opposite side, with the evident intention of crossing. The approaches to the ford were flooded, for the angry water fretted out its banks at such times and deepened into dangerous swirls over the crossing-place.

Rallywood checked the horse to shout and signal to the man that the ford was impassable, but his

voice was drowned by the harsh throated noises of the night. Weak as was the starlight, something of the loose reckless swing in the saddle told Rallywood that the rider was Anthony Unziar. Unziar galloped down the stones of the incline and plunged into the torrent. It was clear from where he took the water that he intended to make for the little beach below the block-house. His course was marked by a whitish rise in the water; now and then the watchers on the bank lost sight of the struggling figure as a tree-trunk whirled past and hid him, or he seemed to sink in some tormented eddy, but he came into view again and always nearer. At the last moment, whether horse and man were exhausted or whether a furious tangle of cross-currents caught them, they were swung round and away from the landing-point.

It was now evident that Unziar saw Rallywood, for in answer to the latter's signs that he must make for the shallows lower down, Unziar waved some object over his head as if to call attention to it. The suck of the current was fast drawing him away, but with another strong effort he got the horse's head round; they heard his faint shout upon the wind then the words came more clearly:

'Carry them on—Selpdorf!' He flung something forwards; the gale caught and hurled it on to the rocks at Rallywood's feet.

When they looked again Unziar had disappeared.

Hurrying up to the block-house, Rallywood sent

off some troopers to Unziar's assistance; then with some difficulty got his prisoner, who was stiff and dizzy, on his feet and supported him to the room where Madame de Sagan and Valerie had rested on the night of the snow-storm.

Rallywood did all that could be done for Counsellor, then he sat down at the narrow table to face his position. The *tsa* battered at the little window, and the camp-bed creaked under Counsellor's weight as he turned and groaned upon it, while Rallywood sat with soul and body absorbed in the consciousness that at last the time of which Counsellor had warned him was come, the time when he should find his enemies dressed in red. Under almost any other circumstances it would have been possible to retire from the position with honour. Had war been declared between England and Maäsau, he could have resigned his commission. But to-night he found himself without any such means of escape, fast in the jaws of the cleverly-contrived trap set for him by Selpdorf.

But he scarcely yet knew the worst. Presently Counsellor spoke.

'This thing has gone beyond a joke,' he said, 'What does it mean?' The glance from under the overhanging gray brows had regained its fire.

'My orders are simple enough. I am to keep you here until to-morrow afternoon at three o'clock.'

'By doing so you will ruin Maäsau as a free State and bring a most serious defeat upon the British

policy.' Counsellor's voice was rasping. 'Are you prepared for that?'

Both men were strenuous, and bred deep into the bone of each were the same dominant qualities.

'I am prepared to carry out my orders,' answered Rallywood; 'I had them practically from the Duke himself.'

'The Duke is of the same mind in which I found him at the Castle, though he may be forced to dissemble,' asserted Counsellor; then with a twist he sat up as his glance fell upon the square dark object lying on the table between them. 'John Rallywood, do you know what that is?'

'The despatches thrown to me by Unziar.'

'That case is mine; it contains my private instructions; you can guess something of their importance from the fact that I have been robbed of them. You must give them back to me! As an Englishman and an honest man, I call upon you to give them back to me.'

Rallywood's long nervous fingers closed over the packet.

'It is impossible!' he said. 'As an Englishman, yes, but as an honest man well, it—it is hard to say.'

'Are you mad?' cried Counsellor.

'I have not had long to think it out, and it is a tangled question,' replied Rallywood wearily.

'A tangled question? I take it you are first of all an Englishman?'

'In my private capacity, and that deals with my

private honour; but I have undertaken another responsibility from which I cannot withdraw at pleasure. I am a sworn soldier of Maäsau, and as such my public honour has first claim.'

It was a simple rendering of a tremendous problem, but it served for Rallywood.

'Then——' said Counsellor.

There was a rush and a scuffle, but Rallywood was young and strong and more active than the Major.

'Confound you!' Counsellor fell back a step or two, breathing hard. There are some situations which by their elemental force destroy all other emotions. The situation at Kofn guard-house was one of these. The point at issue between these two men pierced to the bed-rock of national loyalty. Perhaps Blivinski was right. Love of country was part of their physical equipment, yet by the irony of circumstances they were pitted against each other.

'Will you give me your parole?' asked Rallywood with his back to the door.

Counsellor drew out a big watch.

'For fifteen minutes,' he said. 'It is now half-past nine; at forty-five minutes past I shall hold myself once more free to do what I can. You understand? In the meantime we will talk.'

Rallywood motioned Counsellor back to the camp bed while he himself sat down on the table.

'I fancy, John, we are both rather in the dark

about all this,' began Counsellor. 'Tell me your story, and I'll tell you mine.'

'My orders were clear enough,' Rallywood said. 'I was to take charge of a prisoner, to be brought to me by the incoming mail at the spot where I met you. You arrived queerly, I admit, rolling along the down line, but you are undoubtedly the person of whom I was instructed to take charge.'

'Ah—I begin to see. There may be many men in Maäsau who would rob me, but there is only one man who could do it so clumsily.'

'Count Sagan?'

'Naturally. But to return, I left you at the Castle looking for Colendorp; whether you found him or not does not come into this affair. Perhaps he was in Sagan's way and he removed him——'

'With a knife.'

'That is quite in the Count's manner. Well, I got safely to England, where my business took a day and a half longer than I expected. I received my despatches, and five hundred miles from here I took the precaution of removing them from my despatch-box. After we left the Frontier station I noticed that our train had lost half its length, and that I was in the last carriage. I didn't like it. It is never healthy for a despatch-box to travel in an end compartment. That is tempting of Fate.'

Counsellor stopped as if to collect his thoughts again.

'After a little the pace slackened and I felt a sharp

jolt. They were switching me on to the down line, an improvement upon the original plan so like the Count's manner that it almost proves he must have been on the spot superintending operations. Next it was a face at the window. I used my revolver, but they stunned me and robbed me and left it to the night mail to close my mouth for good. Now you know where you are, John Rallywood; you are abetting a crime, and a crime against your own country, against England!'

Rallywood laughed, but a laugh against oneself has a bad sound with it.

'It seems the day has come when I find my enemies dressed in red!' he said.

'Why, yes, if you choose to put it so. If you either carry these despatches on for Unziar or remain to keep me prisoner, you play Germany's game for her.'

'Perhaps not,' suggested Rallywood. 'The Chancellor sent me here.'

Counsellor's short angry grunt of derision surprised him.

'Mademoiselle Valerie may be loyal, but Selpdorf is at the bottom of the whole plot. Does he guess there is any bond of liking or interest between you and his daughter? If so, he sent you here to break you! He knew that between the conflicting claims of a man's public and private honour lie shame and often death. Do you not see that amongst them they are bent on ruining you? Just now, when I

hoped all might be yours that a man can ask for! Your Chicago cousin at Queen's Fain is dying and you are his heir. Yet you are to be ruined—ruined by the hate of Elmur and Sagan, and what are you to Selpdorf but a fly to be crushed whose presence annoys him?'

'Are you sure of this? His sending me to be witness of your assassination fits in badly with the theory of his collusion.'

'Perfectly; Sagan stultified the scheme, that was all. Selpdorf forgot that Sagan is a wild beast who can only be fed with blood!' Counsellor paused. 'The highway robbery with violence to which I have been subjected is Sagan's bull-headed translation of Selpdorf's hint to detain me. Thus, according to their calculations, before I can get to Révonde the Duke will have been induced to lend himself to some other course. It is not hard to read their tactics. They run on old lines. So you see there is only one way out of it—you must help me, John.'

What advice he might have offered to Rallywood as simple man to man occupied no place in Counsellor's intentions. He was England's envoy as opposed to her antagonists, and into the scale in her favour he meant to throw the whole of his personal influence with Rallywood.

Rallywood made a sign of dissent.

'But surely you will not side with Sagan's party as against the Duke?' urged Counsellor.

'The Duke has been known to change his mind before now.'

Counsellor bit savagely at his moustache. The minutes were flying.

'I wonder if old Gustave has allowed himself to be humbugged yet once more!' he said to himself. 'John, on which side do you suppose Valerie Selpdorf would wish to see you?'

'We need not mention her,' answered Rallywood stiffly.

'What? Have you not spoken? Does she not know?'

'She knows—yes, and others know too that I love her. But it is ended. There is nothing more; there never can be now.'

Counsellor put his hand to his head.

'Will you help me? That after all is the question.'

Rallywood looked down at him, and Counsellor fancied there was a shadow of reproach in the glance.

'For you that is the question, but for me there is another,' Rallywood said deliberately. 'Until I can resign my oath to Maäsau, honour holds me her sworn soldier.'

'Of all things in the world what is so arbitrary as honour?' cried Counsellor. 'Honour is a wild flower; God plants it, but man prunes it, and the devil only can be responsible for the sports one sometimes meets with. Well, go your own and the dev-

il's way!' The Major turned irritably round. 'In my creed a man's first duty is to his country.'

'I wish I could see it so,' said Rallywood sadly. Then the hush of the mighty battle fell upon the little room. The air was stifling to both, for Counsellor knew what was in his companion's heart and even felt a far-off pity for him, but no relenting. Rallywood's handsome brown face had grown suddenly sharp and aged, and his gray eyes contracted to dark points under their frowning lids. The man was looking on the wreck of his life, and slowly coming to the conclusion that he must choose that course which would add the defeat of the land he loved to his own ruin. He would have died for England, happy in the sacrifice, but to lose all in her despite was a bitter thing.

'Time's up,' said the Major. 'You have one minute to give me your decision.'

'A soldier should see no further than the point of his sword,' replied Rallywood. 'An oath stands between me and my desires. These despatches may be yours, but you know how they have come into my charge. As long as I am a soldier of Maäsau, my duty to her comes first of all. I cannot let you go nor can I give up these despatches! Curse you!' a strong flash of emotion breaking in upon the restraint of his speech, 'why have you no sword? If you had killed me——'

Counsellor put his watch back into his pocket.

'A man's country should be his conscience,' said

the old diplomatist, as one who pronounces a definite and unassailable truth. Then he waited.

Rallywood stood up.

'I cannot argue,' he said, 'but Major, you will believe me when I say that I see my duty plainly. I refuse!'

'I have had a great regard for you,' replied Counsellor slowly, 'but if you were my own son, by Heaven, I'd blow your brains out to-night! Give me those despatches.'

There was a rapid movement and the gleam of a pistol barrel in his hand.

'Thank God!' It was not more than the faintest whisper from Rallywood as he sprang at his companion.

But there was no report, only an ominous click as Counsellor flung the unloaded revolver in Rallywood's face with a bitter word.

'It was not loaded.'

Hardly had they closed when the door was opened and a couple of men supported Unziar into the room. The water ran in streams from his clothes to the floor, while he stood and stared at the two combatants who had fallen apart.

'I suppose they sent you to meet me, Rallywood,' he said in English; 'it is lucky, for I'm done! You must carry those despatches on without delay, for they must reach the Chancellor at the earliest possible moment. Go; there is no time to lose!'

Rallywood pointed to Counsellor.

'This gentleman is my prisoner. You will keep him here until further orders. Meantime I will ride on with these to Révonde.'

Counsellor and Unziar remained together, but no word passed between them till out in the windy night they heard the beat of hoofs as Rallywood rode away on his mission.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LOVE'S HANDICAP.

As Rallywood galloped steadily through the night under the shrinking moon, with the *tsa* behind him and the pearl-grey road withering away into the level distance ahead, it happened that the two women of whom he must have had some thoughts during that lonely ride met and spoke together.

'Valerie, I called for you to go with me to the Abenfeldt's reception, because I have a question to ask you,' began Isolde at once when the door of the carriage was closed.

The passing lamps shone varyingly upon their faces as they passed through the lighted streets, and Madame de Sagan looked at her companion.

'Where is Captain Rallywood?' she added abruptly.

His name had not passed between them since the interview at the blockhouse.

'I cannot tell you. I don't know,' said Valerie coldly.

'Oh, my dear child, all is fair in love and war! Why be so dreadfully cross with me still?'

'Is it necessary to recur to the subject at all?'

'Will you never forgive me, I wonder?'

Valerie looked steadily back into the lovely face, where the underlying spirit of mockery was transmuted into an innocent playfulness like a child's.

'On the contrary, I thank you.'

'Why—for humbling him? Valerie, you are ——'

'Happy!' Valerie could not forego the very womanly triumph, 'very happy! And you made me so.'

'But,' said Isolde with some perplexity, 'you would have it that he did not mean what he said.'

In her heart she thought Valerie a great goose for making any such disclaimer. Vanity has knowledge of no tongue whereby to interpret pride.

'No, but it showed me what he was.'

'I wonder how Baron von Elmur would like to hear that his future wife was not ashamed to declare her love for another man!' retorted Isolde.

'I mean to tell him.'

'No, no, Valerie, don't!' exclaimed Madame de Sagan, whose weakness exuded very often in a sort of kind-heartedness, 'I should not tell him. Such a confidence is apt to turn sour in a husband's memory. You may trust me—I will keep your secret.' Valerie smiled scornfully.

'But I can keep a secret! For instance, I want to hear where Captain Rallywood is, because I know the Count hates him, and also,' she nodded her head slowly, 'and also our dear friend Baron von Elmur.'

Valerie was startled.

'Baron von Elmur?' she repeated.

'Oh, you quite mistake the matter. The ill-feeling has nothing to do whatever with you or with me. The Count and von Elmur hate him on very different grounds. Everything appears to interest men nowadays but ourselves!' she ended sadly.

'Because he is English, perhaps?'

'Well, yes, it has something to do with it. You remember that last night at the Castle? I conclude it was Jack who spoiled their plans when Simon and the Baron went to the Duke's apartments.'

'The Count and Baron von Elmur together? What did they go for?'

The question dried up the little stream of babble.

'How should I know? But there was a fight—I'd back Jack against most people! That is one reason I—liked him. We heard the shots, and though I was horribly frightened I told you none of the particulars, yet I knew all. Speak to me, Valerie! What are you thinking of?'

Valerie had been rapidly going over in her mind the incidents Isolde had alluded to. For the first time she understood. There had been a German plot which she had helped to defeat, a plot to place Count Sagan at the head of the State, and the price he was to pay was the freedom of Maäsau. She must see her father before she slept and warn him of the conspiracy, which although it had failed temporarily at the Castle of Sagan was still in existence. She felt certain that her father knew nothing of the Ger-

man plot, nor of Sagan's bitter enmity against himself, as proved by the attempt on her own life. Fears for her father, for Rallywood, and for Maäsau crowded upon her, though she kept up an appearance of composure that Isolde might not guess the importance of the information she had given.

'I was thinking of Captain Rallywood,' answered the girl at last, offering the excuse Isolde would be most likely to accept as true. 'I did not know he had so many enemies. But is he not in Révonde?'

'No, he has not been at the barracks since yesterday afternoon. I sent him an invitation. You never give me credit for sincerity, but I am steady in my friendships. I do not mean to drop him because he talked all that nonsense at Kofn Ford. You boasted about M. Selpdorf's power—make him use it now to save Rallywood. I begin to believe that you are really as cold as you pretend to be, Valerie, you care so little! Whereas I, in spite of all that has happened, would serve him if I could.'

'I shall see my father when I return to-night, I promise you.'

Isolde buttoned her glove thoughtfully.

'You must be careful not to let him suspect that you have any especial interest in Jack,' she said, 'for that would be merely an additional reason for letting Rallywood—go.'

Valerie could not misunderstand the euphemism.

'Isolde, my father is not a savage!' she exclaimed.

'Perhaps not,' said Madame de Sagan simply.

'He is, I know, a very charming man in society, but my experience goes to show that every man is a savage—*au fond.*'

Words which embody the opinion of more women than one cares to number.

It was three o'clock when an officer of the Guard, leaving the wind-swept darkness of the country behind him, rode through the north gate of Révonde into the vivid black and white perspectives of the city, where close outside the brilliant line of electric lights night herself seemed to stand incarnate, a jealous intensity of blackness.

Rallywood had picked up Unziar's relays of horses at certain points, and on the whole had made good time of the ride. Now he crossed the bridge that lies opposite to the gate of the Palace, and mounted the curving streets towards the Chancellerie.

He swung from his horse at the foot of the broad flight of granite steps under its overhanging portico as a carriage dashed up on the other side. The high doors above were flung open and a roll of red cloth dropped from step to step down to the pavement, a couple of footmen placing it with the quick deftness of use until it reached the carriage.

As she alighted Mademoiselle Selpdorf recognised the tall figure in the travel-stained riding cloak.

'Captain Rallywood, where have you come from?' she asked almost involuntarily.

'From the frontier, Mademoiselle.'

'Will you give me your arm? What has hap-

pened? Has Major Counsellor come back?' she whispered as they went up the steps.

'He is at the Ford. He has met with an accident.'

Valerie said no more, but as she entered the hall she read Rallywood's face.

'Has his Excellency returned?' she asked of an attendant. 'Then place refreshments in the small library. Captain Rallywood, I will join you in a few moments. M. Selpdorf will be home very soon. He is anxious to see you.'

It was a little necessary make believe before the numerous servants. How far it deceived them may be faintly guessed when one considers anyone's secrets in relation to anyone's servants.

'Man designs his own game,' thought Rallywood as he followed the servant into whose charge he was given, 'or he is forced to stand out and circumstances play it for him. In the years all is one.'

Whichever way the issue of this night's work turned, Maäsau and Valerie must both pass from his life forever. The one supreme obstacle which lurks always beside the mercenary's path had arisen to bar his advance at last.

Valerie opened the door softly. She was trembling and afraid, but she would not be outdone in generosity by Rallywood. She had determined to thank him for the words spoken at Kofn Ford, and to show him how entirely she comprehended their chivalrous intention. But when her eyes fell upon him all thought of self faded. He was standing

midway between the gleaming wine and glass of the sidetable and the flickering glow of the open stove, upright and stately as he ever appeared to her, but in his new attitude her sharpened senses perceived a suggestion of disheartenment and solitude.

Swept away by the feeling of the moment, she crossed the room to his side and laid her hand upon his arm.

'What is it? Something has happened,' she said.

Rallywood looked down at her. The beautiful eyes like star-lit darkness, her clear-hued loveliness, the soft dusky curls about her brow, her girlish reserves and petulances, all her sweet unapproachable personality enhanced to pain the knowledge that he was looking his last upon them.

'Nothing to distress you, Mademoiselle, because M. Selpdorf knows all about it.'

'Then tell me; I know so much already.'

'I wish I could. But I think his Excellency might prefer to tell you himself.'

'Is it good news, then? Major Counsellor has succeeded? Then why are you so sad?'

'Sad, Mademoiselle?' he answered with a smile. 'Men often look sad when they are only hungry and dog-tired.'

'Then eat,' she said. 'Let me give you some wine.'

She drew him to the table and poured out a glass of wine.

'To the success of Maäsau and of England,' she

said. Then touching it with her lips in the graceful fashion of Maäsau, she handed it to him.

'Hark! I think I hear my father arriving, and there is something I must say to you before he comes.'

She clasped her hands nervously, the bare shapely hands with their gleaming rings, and Rallywood watched her and felt as if he were dreaming.

'Captain Rallywood, I want to thank you. I can never thank you enough for that night at Kofn Ford. I understood—pray believe I understood it—and I think you are the noblest gentleman alive!'

Rallywood did not hesitate. There was one thing Valerie should know and be certain of in the uncertain future.

'Give me a moment, Mademoiselle,' he exclaimd, detaining her. 'I see you do not quite understand. I could not expect you to understand. But now—now that I am leaving Maäsau, I must tell you the truth. Perhaps you will believe it some day. I am proud——'

'I know it, and yet you—oh, say no more! For my sake you stooped to say it. It was not true! But I knew that.'

He took her hands between his own in a firm strong clasp.

'Listen, Mademoiselle. It was true! Since first I saw you it has always been true!'

'I remember!' she said breathlessly. She could not help saying it.

'Do you?' he answered; the temptation to wander a little was too sweet. 'You wore this cloak,' he touched it softly with his fingers, then laid his hand over hers deliberately, in the quiet confident way in which he did exerything and which she had grown to love, 'and ever since I have carried the glove you despised. And though this is my good-bye, I will carry it—always.'

'But—but——'

'Oh, I don't ask you to believe me now,' he said bitterly. 'I am not noble, Mademoiselle. I was only too proud to say I loved you that night, as,' with another smile, 'I was only too proud not to say it before.'

Valerie raised her face and her eyes were full of light.

'Then it was true—thank God!'

But Rallywood, though he saw the purpose of her speech, would not understand its significance. He led her towards the door by which she had entered.

'You must go, Mademoiselle. I—dare not keep you with me longer. Good-bye, and may God go with you, Valerie!'

She stopped suddenly and kissed the hand that held hers.

'I too am proud,' she whispered, and the door closed upon her.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MAN OF THE HOUR.

'SELPDORF is the man of the hour,' Counsellor once said to Rallywood, and the Major's sayings had a trick of lingering in the memory. With the Chancellor then still remained the key to the situation. He was implicated in the conspiracy, but he had less to gain and far more to lose than the others. A dangerous condition and one possible of development.

All this passed in a flash through Rallywood's mind as the opposite door opened to admit M. Selpdrof, who replied stiffly to Rallywood's bow.

'I was not prepared to see you this evening,' began Selpdorf.

'I have brought the despatches, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood, taking the packet from his pocket but continuing to hold it in his hand.

Selpdorf eyed him.

'From whom?'

'Lieutenant Unziar.'

The affair was falling out in an unexpected manner. Selpdorf was a student of human nature as all of his craft must be, and Rallywood offered for his observation a character out of the common and hard

for a Maäsaun to read. How had he escaped from the dilemma in which he had been so carefully placed? The Chancellor was curious to hear. The man was an artist in the human passions.

'From Lieutenant Unziar?' Selpdorf repeated tentatively. 'And your prisoner? The man whom I ordered you to keep at the block-house?'

The Chancellor half expected to hear that Counsellor was also in Révonde, and that Rallywood with an unassuming but unspeakable effrontery had called to explain his own view of the matter.

'Unziar is with him—with Major Counsellor at Kofn Ford. Unziar was unable to ride on at once after crossing the river, which is in flood. Therefore I have come.'

Was it possible Rallywood had merely shirked facing the difficulty in this way? thought Selpdorf.

'Ah, Major Counsellor? And these are the despatches?'

'These are Major Counsellor's private despatches, which were stolen from him within the frontier of Maäsau!' said Rallywood.

Selpdorf's round eyes showed their lids in an odd flicker. The attack was sudden. He brushed his moustache upwards with a thoughtful movement of the finger and thumb, regarding Rallywood as he did so.

'Then why have you brought them to me?' he said at last.

'Because a soldier should see no further than the

point of his sword, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood slowly.

'Good! And how do you come to know what the packet contains?'

'The persons who robbed Major Counsellor did not even take the precaution of placing it under another cover. He recognised it at the block-house.'

'It seems to me then that you had a decision to make at the block-house?'

'Yes,' said Rallywood simply.

But it was not a subject to bear discussion.

'As a soldier of Maäsau you decided rightly.' Selpdorf misjudged Rallywood for the moment; it crossed his mind that this was a mercenary after all and to be bought.

'But as a man I now wish to resign my commission.'

Selpdorf raised his brows.

'But why? At the very moment when you have proved your faithfulness and your zeal? When we owe you recognition of these high qualities?'

'I want nothing, your Excellency, but to go out from this house a free man,' returned Rallywood coldly.

'Reconsider your words, Captain Rallywood.'

'Even if other difficulties had not arisen,' went on Rallywood, 'I may remind your Excellency that a soldier's oath does not cover robbery and assassination.'

Selpdorf was, and looked, astonished.

'I don't understand you,' he said gravely. 'Pray tell me what you mean.'

'I found Major Counsellor alone and unconscious in a single carriage that had been sent rolling down the incline on the line where the outgoing mail train could not fail to collide with it. The inference is clear. Some one wished to make an end of him—in a railway accident. But the plan was a curiously stupid one, for nothing could satisfactorily explain Major Counsellor's presence there, since it was well known to the British Legation in Révonde that he was entering not leaving Maäsau.'

Selpdorf stood silent. Here was another ill-devised amendment born of Count Sagan's blundering brain.

'It is a very strange story,' he said at length. 'Had the train come in collision with the carriage which you assert was on the down line——'

'The troops from Kofn and the railway people at Alfau can prove that.'

'The mail might have been derailed, with no one can tell what loss of life.'

'Count Simon holds life cheap,' said Rallywood. 'No life that stands in his way can be safe. Not even the life of Mademoiselle Selpdorf!'

The Chancellor was moved for once.

'You are out of your senses!' he said sternly.

'It is true!'

Both men looked around. Valerie had entered.

'Father, you must hear me before you—before you——'

She glanced at Rallywood and stopped.

'Go, Valerie; you have nothing to do with these things.'

Selpdorf met her as she came towards him.

'You must hear me to-night, father. You are mistaken; I have had a great deal to do with them. I know all that Captain Rallywood has said to you —yes, I had a right to know. For it was I who brought Major Counsellor to the Duke's apartments at the Castle, because I knew there was a plot against his Highness. But I did not know it was a German plot in which Baron von Elmur was using Count Sagan. Oh, you must be on your guard against them!'

'Who has been frightening you with all this nonsense?' asked Selpdorf with cold suspicion.

'You don't understand me! Father, I know how Captain Colendorp died. I saw it—the struggle and his fall over the cliff. Then I guessed his Highness was in danger, and I went to warn him. Captain Rallywood, tell my father of Count Sagan's visit to the Duke's rooms in the middle of the night with Baron von Elmur. I—we, Isolde and I—heard the shots. You do not know it, but there is a plot. Your life is not safe! Captain Rallywood is right; no life that stands in Count Sagan's way is safe! And you on whom the State depends—you who

alone can uphold her liberty—you are the first they will try to destroy! He hates you, else why should he try to kill me?'

She was clinging to his arm.

'To kill you? If I thought that was true—if I could believe he meant to injure you——'

It added very much to Selpdorf's difficulties that he had a conscience and a heart. Perhaps Valerie had kept both awake. He, who acted a part to all the world, had been sedulous to maintain a high *rôle* before his daughter. Perhaps he valued her absolute faith in him even more than her love, which is a commoner attitude of mind than we realise.

He felt himself at fault. Although he had heard no details to enable him to judge for himself, yet he knew he could rely upon Valerie's statement that an attempt had been made upon her life. Count Simon's unscrupulousness was an old tale, but this crime was not only cold-blooded but also extraordinarily stupid, since the faintest suspicion of foul play would finally estrange the one person in all Maäsau whose help was necessary to the success of his plans and hopes. It is to be doubted whether the Count's ineptitude did not disgust the Chancellor more thoroughly than his treachery towards Valerie.

Selpdorf was at no time a man who made up his mind irrevocably. Astuteness sometimes keeps step with uncertainty. To a clever man so many sides of a question are visible. On all counts he was now prepared to yield to Valerie's wishes; perhaps look-

ing ahead even in that moment, he saw a fresh combination before him, which, while quite equally safe and useful to himself, omitted Count Sagan.

The Chancellor raised his eyes. At this moment —diplomatically—he was superb. He had an air of sagacious decision, an air of holding a masterstroke in reserve, whereas he was in reality merely retiring to a negative position to wait upon events.

'Tell me the story,' he said.

'There is nothing further to tell,' replied Rallywood. 'Mademoiselle has given you the main facts. But for her Maäsau would to-day be a province of Germany, in fact if not in name.

'I have been misinformed and deceived in an incomprehensible manner,' the Chancellor said emphatically. There was still the matter of Counsellor's despatches. Nothing was now to be gained by keeping them, whereas by giving them back to the old diplomatist, Maäsau was sure to profit for the time at least. The difficulty was to get rid of the packet without loss of prestige to himself. 'Now as to Major Counsellor's despatches,' he added doubtfully.

'You will send them back to him,' said Valerie eagerly.

'You cannot see the difficulty of my position.' The Chancellor laid his hand upon her shoulder. 'To be frank with you, and in confidence, Captain Rallywood, I have not been ignorant that an under-

standing existed between Count Sagan and the Baron von Elmur. I have even been obliged to countenance it to a certain extent. As you know, they are aware that these despatches have been sent to me. If I use them as my daughter suggests, I need scarcely point out that trouble must ensue, since I, more or less, represent Maäsau. Now we cannot afford to offend Germany. She only awaits a pretext to hurl down her army of occupation upon us. Had I never had those despatches the way might have been easier.'

His glance at Rallywood held a large reproach.

'But, father, in honesty and justice'—

'It is a case of private justice as opposed to national necessity. If Captain Rallywood had sacrificed his public to his private honour, if he had chosen to prefer his country's cause to his oath of fealty—'

Rallywood understood.

'No one knows I am here,' he said.

'Ah, true!'

'No one need ever know where the despatches have been. In four hours they shall be with Major Counsellor at the British Legation.'

'If you, Captain Rallywood, will bear the whole responsibility that would simplify the matter. Otherwise it is war.' Selpdorf looked meaningly at Rallywood as he spoke.

But Valerie was not deceived.

'Not that! not that!' she cried.

'It must be that or nothing.' Selpdorf did not look at her and he spoke almost brusquely.

'I know what it means. They will say he was false to his oath! Oh, father, is there no other way? I cannot let him go!'

Rallywood's face changed. Fate was crushing her two strange gifts into his hands, love and death at the same moment! He crossed to Valerie's side, and drawing her to him his gray eyes looked their courage and their happiness into hers.

'My darling, this makes it easy, whatever comes!'

'It may be death! It will be death!' He winced at the low agonised whisper.

She turned to her father.

'Father, you have the power to do anything you please in Maäsau. You will save him for me! You can save him! Promise me that or I cannot let him go!'

Selpdorf was touched. He liked Rallywood. There was much in the single-hearted soldier that appealed to his sympathies. But——

'I will not deceive you, Valerie, at such a time as this,' he answered gently; 'I cannot foresee what may happen. I may not be able to prevent the worst. Captain Rallywood holds the despatches. He offers to sacrifice himself for the State, and the decision rests with you.'

Valerie buried her face in her hands. The clock moved noiselessly on and on, and the very air seemed

to throb in the silence. Then the girl raised her head and looked steadily at Rallywood.

'It would not be love if I said otherwise. You would not love me if I said otherwise. You must go, John!'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ARREST.

By the following evening tongues were busy in Révonde. Rumour and mystery and an absence of any definite information added zest to the town talk. The broken reports were curious.

Major Counsellor had fallen down the staircase at the British Legation and injured his head, his brow being much contused. His return to Révonde was explained on the ground that Germany and England had joined forces in compelling Selpdorf to lessen the heavy taxation with which Maäsau was burdened. Count Sagan had been seen in the city with a lowering face—ah, yes! it was well known he had a most patriotic distrust of German interference. Madame de Sagan had quarreled with her husband because she had insisted on helping Mademoiselle Selpdorf, who was about to be married to Baron von Elmur, in the choice of her trousseau. Some excitement was being caused in the Guards' barracks by the case of Captain Rallywood, whom Count Sagan accused of using his influence unduly with his brother-officers to forward the projects of Germany. Some even went so far as to say that he was in arrest, and others were found who shook their heads

and laughed, professing to be aware of a yet deeper reason for the colonel-in-chief's animosity against the English captain.

Out of all this chaff the one grain of truth was that Counsellor, released by Unziar on the authority of a telegram from Rallywood, had arrived by the first train in the morning and had at once proceeded to the British Legation. There he found Rallywood waiting for him. 'You have seen the Chancellor?' asked Counsellor, looking hard at Rallywood, whose brown face wore a look he had never seen upon it before. 'Why was I released? Am I already too late?'

'No, you are not too late. You must see the Duke at once. Here are your despatches. Good-bye, Major, I'll meet you presently.'

'I shall not in all probability see Duke Gustave again. My part is over and done with. The world, my dear John, never sees a national policy until it begins to fly. There is no credit for hatching the egg. One would almost think it hatched of itself. Occasionally the egg is found to be addled, and then the old birds make away with it in private. But don't go yet. How have you managed to keep these? What does it mean?'

'It means principally that you must forget you have been robbed, that Elmur's game is up, and that you were mistaken in your opinion of the Chancellor.'

Counsellor looked hurriedly through the papers

contained in the packet, 'John,' he said suddenly, as he folded up a small sheet of cypher notes, 'you are an infernal liar.'

Rallywood laughed and his spurs jingled as he left the room, glad to have escaped so cheaply from Counsellor's keen observation. The old Major went to the window and watched him ride away in the sunshine, a gallant figure in his glittering uniform, sitting squarely on his big bay charger. No suspicion crossed his thoughts that Rallywood was probably taking his last ride through the sunny streets, that at every stride of his high-stepping horse he drew nearer to the final scene of all. He had gathered from Rallywood's bearing that the difficulties in his path had somehow been surmounted. Rallywood was capable. He had won the day by energy or pluck or both, but the old diplomatist had no time at the moment to trouble his head as to the exact means.

Before the forenoon was over Counsellor, acting through the proper channels, secured Maäsau's acceptance of the British proposals, and a satisfactory undertaking which excluded all rivals from the field, at any rate during the Duke's lifetime. Counsellor did not appear in the negotiations. He remained shut up at the Legation, but when at length they came to public knowledge the German party were not under any delusion; they recognised to whose direct offices they owed defeat.

Baron von Elmur said nothing, as a matter of fact

he did nothing, but he used his influence with an effect that was yet to bear fruit. He was inclined to suspect Selpdorf, but the Chancellor proved that he had only carried out the German's own suggestion in sending Rallywood to the Frontier. Ill-luck, he argued, combined with Sagan's blundering, had done the rest. He deplored it. It was clear that Rallywood, taking advantage of his position, and under pretence of carrying the despatches to the Chancellor had simply gone to Révonde and wired to Unziar a false order of release for Major Counsellor. The sole delinquent was Rallywood, and the Count in a torrent of curses promised himself a time of reckoning.

The day, which had begun in a brief burst of sunshine, closed in clouds. Evening climbed sullenly up out of the bleak river.

Traffic died in the streets, and the cloaked troopers passing hither and thither against the rising *tsa* became the chief objects to be seen as night gathered.

Rallywood stood at the side window of his quarters looking out over the twinkling city. He seemed to have had as yet no time for regret or gloomy anticipation. He had dwelt absorbed on the single fact that Valerie loved him. He was ready to sacrifice himself and his hopes with a smile. Later on, in sorrow and heaviness of heart, he accused himself bitterly of spoiling Valerie's young life. But he had not reached that stage yet; he was lingering in the first transient period when men and women see

visions and dream dreams, when the present is lost in the recent past, while love's first spell is laid upon them, and the light that never was on land or sea blinds them to the chances and changes of common life. As long as the glory of it lasts a man is caught up into the seventh heaven, and the things of earth have no power over him.

But the breaking of the vision came to Rallywood sufficiently quickly. His view of the lamp-lit city grew suddenly blurred and he saw instead his own reflection in the polished glass, as the lights were turned on in the room behind him. In that same instant too the vague sweet outlook faded from his mind.

Then a hand was laid upon his shoulder and he saw another figure mirrored beside his own against the dark background of the night. There was a suggestion of reluctance in Unziar's movements.

'I regret, Captain Rallywood, that I have been ordered to place you in arrest.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COURT-MARTIAL.

It has been the privilege of one or two famous Gardes du Corps to be a law unto themselves. The Guard of Maäsau shares that privilege. The inquiry or rather trial was to be held within closed doors, and by the express order of the colonel-in-chief all the officers, including those junior to the prisoner, were to be present. And every officer present on such occasions had the right to vote. The procedure was simple. When the witnesses had been examined the accused was invited to speak in his own defence, then the senior officer summed up and lastly the officers recorded their votes.

Rallywood's offence had outraged the fundamental principle of the Guard, the blind self-sacrificing obedience which in trivial as in vital matters demanded the merging of the private individual with hopes and conscience of his own into the body corporate of the Guard. With the single exception of Unziar, no man present was acquainted with the details of Rallywood's crime. They knew only that he had grossly disobeyed orders, and not only that, but had disobeyed them for the furtherance of private ambition. So the charge against him intimated. It was

understood that the accusation had been lodged by Count Sagan in consequence of information received by him, and the court-martial at once assembled to deal with the matter.

The original prejudice against Rallywood as a foreigner and an interloper was revived, with all the more bitterness because the men had in the interval come to respect if not to like him. They resented the deception they believed to have been practised upon them with the rancour of those who find they have not only been played upon but made tools of. Rallywood had gained his position among them by false pretences to serve his own ends—gained it to betray them.

But more than this, he had dishonoured the Guard, brought the first blot of treachery upon its long and unblemished traditions. Hereditary instincts inbred and powerful were arrayed against him in the hearts of six of his judges; in the seventh, Count Sagan, he had to encounter the ill-blood of a profoundly vindictive nature whose purposes he had crossed and baffled, and who harboured towards him a savage personal hatred.

It must be understood that so far no hint of the arrangement with England had been allowed to transpire. The engagement to be given by Maäsau in return for the promised British loan and moral support was in train for completion, but the final signature was not to take place till that afternoon. Meantime the Chancellor kept a still tongue in his

head and waited upon events, knowing that when all transpired the responsibility could be shifted on to the shoulders of the Duke. It was a risky game, but M. Selpdorf had played many another—and won them all. At the same time he had no intention of putting out his hand to save Rallywood, whose disappearance from the scheme of earthly affairs would remove an awkward cause of disagreement from the range of his own family circle. Yet it must be admitted that M. Selpdorf really regretted that the necessities of the case required the sacrifice of the Englishman, for whom his former abstract liking remained entirely unaltered.

The doors of the great mess-room were closed, for within them the court-martial was in progress. At the central table seven men with the marks of power upon them were gathered. Above them the torn banners of the regiment hung in the red gloom of the dome, but about the men themselves the gray-white light of a winter day fell from the riverward windows. It seemed to dull even the red glow of the hangings, that cold light, which lent to the faces of those assembled a strange effect of pallor.

It is a common experience that silence in a place associated in the mind with voices and the movement and sounds of life has a weird and impressive effect. Enter an empty church and you are chilled; hear a will read in the room which you connect with laughter and the genial routine of everyday events, and the uncanny quiet, falling away from the single

voice, benumbs you. Thus in the mess-room, where music and laughter and the hubbub of men's talking usually resounded, the unwonted stillness, broken only by the piercing wail of the *tsa,* struck coldly and heavily upon the senses.

Count Sagan, his big chest covered with gold-lace and orders, loomed at the head of the table, Wallenloup and Ulm to his right and left, Adiron, Unziar, Adolf and Varanheim seated according to their rank. At the foot of the table in the uniform of the Guard but without a sword stood the prisoner.

One man present was a complete stranger to Rally-wood—Major Ulm, who had just returned from leave, and whose keen eyes set in a thin shaven face scrutinised him coldly. Behind Ulm's bald forehead dwelt most of the sagacity and discretion of the Guard. Strongly as his prejudices were excited he could not avoid being struck by the bearing of the prisoner.

There was a cold fierceness about the men of the Guard, but Rallywood stood unmoved under the many hostile eyes.

A court-martial, where the prisoner is condemned, is perhaps the most awful scene of justice upon earth. This is so because it contains within itself elements that edge its painfulness. The judges wield not only the power of death, but the power of putting a man to utter shame. The prisoners who stand at such a tribunal may be credited with the capability, given to them by training if not by nature, of feeling

shame. And the capability of suffering shame is as distinct a quality as the sense of honour.

Count Sagan glared round the table, and the aspect of his colleagues pleased him; they felt under his rough imagination like a sword whose temper the fighter is sure of. There was a horrible energy, a furious relentlessness about his very attitude and ringing in his voice that drove every word of his accusation into and through his hearers. As president he put questions to the prisoner, who answered them unmoved.

Rallywood fronted them calm and soldierlike, the picture of a gallant despair. He felt as though he stood clear of his life. It was lived and the end in sight. His position was hard, but he seemed to be ready to say Amen to whatever the fates might send. He had no thought of struggling for life and love. He was far otherwise. He was one whose love is hopeless, whose loved one is lost as though in death, and who lives through the present dream according to an ideal, the ideal of being worthy of the vanished past.

Unziar alone looked stonily blank, but the other grim faces round the table regarded Rallywood with a sort of satisfaction. He had sinned against them, but they were about to make him pay the highest human penalty for his sin. Yet to Ulm his demeanour was suggestive. There was something eloquent of singleness of heart and nobleness that seemed to buoy up this man with his broken honour.

There was no parade of outraged innocence, nothing but a fearless reserve.

Rallywood hardly heard the grave voices that discussed his fate, stirring as they did so the clogging quiet which hung with such solemn effect over the historic room.

Those lofty walls had never before echoed to a similar charge or a like disgrace. The accusation was set forth in general terms. It spoke only of a certain prisoner and certain despatches. Rallywood acting under valid orders, had taken over the despatches from Unziar, and next by a false telegram to Unziar had ordered the release of a certain prisoner. Also he had used the despatches to forward aims of his own, to the loss and detriment of the Free State of Maäsau. Anthony Unziar gave his evidence briefly and with caution, but it was conclusive.

After the charge had been completed and proved, a few minutes silence ensued. Then Count Sagan addressed the prisoner.

'Captain Rallywood, have you anything to say in your own defence?'

A sudden jarring sense of amusement struck upon Rallywood. They were playing a farce; Count Simon, with his mortal enmity, was but acting his part. The whole procedure was hollow yet he Rallywood would have to give his life to prove that all this seeming was deadly earnest—that the blus-

tering traitor opposite was not a defeated schemer but a loyal son of Maäsau!

Rallywood could not repress a quick smile.

Count Simon flung his fist upon the table.

'Do you hear me?' he shouted; 'what have you to say in your defence?'

Rallywood looked him in the eyes.

'Nothing,' he said.

There was a hush. Sagan picked up the glances of the officers round him. Rallywood's words had come as a shock. Most of the men expected some attempt if not at a defence at least at a justification of his conduct.

Sagan's harsh voice was raised again.

'His sword.'

Unziar sprang up hurriedly.

'It is in the ante-room,' he said; 'I will bring it.'

Sagan rose from his place as Unziar returned with a naked sword in his hand. The Count took it and laid it on the table before him.

Then standing he addressed the court.

'Gentlemen of the Guard,—I must thank you in the first place for the admirable patience with which you have listened to the details of the abominable crime with which the prisoner, John Rallywood, is charged. His guilt has been proved up to the hilt by Lieutenant Unziar's evidence, but in addition to that the accused was not ashamed to convict himself out of his own mouth. The sentence upon a traitor as upon a mutinous soldier is unalterable. It is death!

No doubt, gentlemen, we are unanimously agreed upon that, and the formality of the ballot is all that is left.'

The ballot-box stood upon a side-table at the upper end of the room, and beside it a basket with a number of ivory balls, some black, some white. The officers went up in rotation and each with his back to the company placed a ball of the colour he chose in the ballot-box.

The haggard daylight was fading slowly as the men left their chairs and returned to them in silence.

Rallywood waited, not in suspense indeed, but with the full sense that his fate was being legally recorded by a jury of his fellows. It is at such a moment as this that a man goes back to his belief in God. If there is no God, to what end anything? Those who say there is no God say the world is a sad and very evil place. If their creed were universally accepted, the last state of humanity would be worse than the first, and earth degenerate into a hopeless and helpless hell.

'Six black balls, one white,' announced Major Ulm.

The prisoner's gray frank eyes flashed out at Unziar, but the Maäsaun's rigid face gave no sign.

Then Count Sagan, secure of his enemy, let himself go. He lifted the sword from the table, and casting one more glance at the prisoner, he placed the gleaming point upon the floor, bending the delicate blade, and stamping upon it midway with his

booted heel. There was a shallow ring as the steel broke, then a clash of metal as the Count flung the hilt upon the point, as if the touch contaminated him.

'John Rallywood, this court has found you guilty and condemned you to die! And I, Count Simon of Sagan, colonel-in-chief of the Guard of Maäsau, now pronounce upon you the sentence of death. Trusted by the Guard, you chose to betray them! Where is the oath of fealty by which you swore to obey? We are polluted by your treason, we are tainted by your shame! Are you afraid to speak? Is your voice frozen in your throat? The greater part of your punishment should be in its shame. But you cannot feel it! You and shame are strangers—the last infamy of the base! You are loathsome, a mercenary false to his salt, a hound who sold himself for money first and for disgraceful gain afterwards! How can I touch you? Where can I prod you? On what nerve, since the nerve of shame is dead? Like the groom, one could only punish you with a whip. I shall lay the matter before the Duke. I will urge it upon my colleagues,' he swept his arm round the table; 'a hundred with the whip or to run the gauntlet of the Guard. That would touch you more than words, or shame, or death! Ha, that reaches you!' he cried, and then there was a fierce exultation in the raucous volleying words, 'You have disgraced the Guard but we cannot for reasons of state publicly disgrace you. But you shall be shot—

shot like a dog! You shall not meet death face to face as many a brave man has met it, but you shall be shot, cringing with your back to the gun-muzzles —like the cur you are!'

Rallywood's pale features had flushed for a second. There was a brutality about Sagan's denunciations which shocked the men around him. Rallywood deserved something, but not this, not that! Unziar's eyes burned, Wallenloup was frowning. But Sagan swept on. He was a man who trampled horribly upon a fallen foe.

At last Wallenloup could bear it no longer. He rose to his feet and saluting the Count led the way from the room, the line closing with Rallywood between Adolf and Unziar as guard.

Left alone in the great dim vaulted chamber, Sagan stood upright and watched the door through which they had filed out, and there came upon him in the dying daylight a terrible moment, such as all uncontrolled natures must at times know. A sense of the futility of all things, a knowledge that life has lost its taste, the hideousness of finally baffled desire.

He hurled out his heavy arms with a wild gesture.

'Where have they gone? Where are they, the strong lusts and hates and triumphs—the satisfactions of the old days? The world has grown puny. It is empty, empty, empty!'

CHAPTER XXX.

'UPON THE GREAT WORLD'S ALTAR-STAIRS.'

It is a commonplace that selfish natures, balked of gratification, seek relief in making the unhappiness of others, preferably of those who are helpless to resist or to resent. Therefore Count Sagan employed the interval before going to the Palace to procure the signature of the Duke to Rallywood's death-warrant in paying a flying visit to his wife, whom he had not seen since the morning of the boar-hunt at the Castle.

He found several other people calling upon Madame de Sagan, who was not fond of solitude. Numbers gave the pretty Countess courage. She took no notice of her husband's entrance, although the soft colour left her face instantly as a candle-flame is blown out. But Count Simon had only five minutes to spare and something to say in them. Isolde's feeble rebellion escaped him; he strode to her side, and with a single glance dispersed the little coterie of guests about her, the only one who kept his position being Baron von Elmur.

Sagan stood before his wife, an evil smile on his coarse bearded mouth. He nodded at Elmur.

'I have news of interest for both of you.'

'Ah! it is over then?' Elmur asked at once. He discerned the Count's intention and would have averted its fulfilment if possible. The thought that he was about to make a woman unhappy never deterred Elmur from any course of action whatsoever, but he preferred not to see them so. He delighted in pretty women, and Isolde of Sagan was exceptionally pretty; therefore, for the sake of the next half hour of her society he would have spared her the tidings her husband's malice designed to thrust upon her in public. Afterwards the deluge might come, but what matter? Have we not all our deluges in private that submerge our world in tears? 'Madame has kindly promised to assist in the *tableaux vivants* next week,' he added hastily.

The Count grinned his contempt.

'You should reproduce the death of a traitor. Come to see Rallywood shot in the morning by way of an object lesson.'

Madame de Sagan's hand flew to her throat with a quick gasp of horror; for a second the room seemed to swing round, then slowly settle again.

'Why, what has he done?' she asked; her lips were dry but she spoke deliberately.

'Nothing new, only he happened to be found out this time. Well, au revoir!'

Elmur stood up and followed him.

'The signature of his Highness?' he asked in a low voice.

'I go to get it and other things also. I have arranged the interview with Selpdorf.'

Elmur bowed and returned to his place by the side of the Countess. Isolde's blue eyes, dewy as a child's with unshed tears, appealed to him.

'It is not true?'

Elmur reflected that he had never before seen her look so pretty. Most women with tears in their eyes repelled his fastidiousness, but this one was delicious. He bent towards her and said as much with a fervour that surprised her. She smiled tremulously. She had always considered the wary German worth capturing, but he was an elusive bird. Admiration had never before got the better of his self-possession; now for the first time he appeared to be carried away by it. The keenness of conquest thrilled her. Jack? —ah, yes, poor Jack! But he was practically lost to her for ever. She sighed a little; she had been fond of Jack, but the love that can stand against the inevitable was not hers. She reminded herself that Jack had preferred Valerie—but, why, so had Elmur! A temptation came to her; she glanced again at Elmur. He was personable though advancing to middle age, and handsome as men go, though his eyes were close-set and cunning. He was not like poor Jack—no, she would never find anyone perhaps quite so good to look upon as Jack, with his broad shoulders and corn-coloured hair, and those dear frank eyes! No, but——

'Madame, what are you thinking of? I wish I

dared flatter myself that I could ever draw tears to those exquisite eyes,' Elmur said again with warmth. He wanted excitement and Isolde was yielding. There are women who will sacrifice the most sacred things, God's word itself, on the altar of their vanity. Isolde withdrew her slight hand from his touch, but it was the withdrawal that invites advance. She hesitated no longer.

'There are other eyes whose tears will be bitterer than mine; are you not jealous of them? I am sorry for Captain Rallywood, of course, but poor Valerie —what am I saying?'

'Whatever you say interests me,' he urged, his eyes following hers.

She pouted coquettishly.

'Yes, because I speak of Valerie!'

'No, it is because you speak!' he declared amorously. 'Tell me of Mademoiselle Valerie if you will,' this as a concession, 'though you could tell me something more interesting.'

'Not more interesting to you than this,' she exclaimed, nodding her golden head at him with her little air of foolish wisdom. 'It is lucky that Captain Rallywood is—is about to furnish an object-lesson, for——' she raised her slender finger and laid it on her lips, smiling at him.

He looked round. They were alone in a smaller drawing-room; it was not possible for the guests in the other saloon to see them. He drew the finger from her lips and pressed it to his own. He would

woo the truth from this beautiful fool. His words meant one thing, his looks another.

'And Valerie?' he questioned, seeming to count her fingers on his palm.

'Valerie loves him—she told me so,' whispered Isolde, since there was no longer need to speak louder.

'And you, my dear lady?' And it may be the speech was the more impassioned because in his heart he was damning the picturesqueness of the captain of the Guard.

. . . . . .

And Rallywood? Rallywood sat in his quarters thinking thoughts that, like music, lead sometimes on to exaltation. His earthly life was done, and he looked out into the dim beyond fearlessly. His eyes were set and sad, for he should see her face and hear Valerie's voice no more, but he would be waiting in that somewhere for her. A man in the supremer hours often turns again to the faiths of his childhood; so now Rallywood, at the summit of his life, found himself given back all those lost dreams.

He did not know how she came there. He heard no footstep enter. And when he knew, neither spoke.

There was nothing to say; it was all understood so well. She stood beside him, her hands in his in a strange lull of mutual knowledge.

'How did you come?' he asked her at last.

'Anthony,' she answered, 'he knows—all.'

'How like him! But,' with a man's ready thought for the woman he loves, 'you must not be found here. Say good-bye to me, Valerie.'

'John,' she clung to him, 'how can I let you go? You are dying for Maäsau—for my father—for me —yes, yes, I can guess all!'

'Valerie, do you know what your love is to me? I need nothing more. I have not thought of what there is beyond, but when you want me you will find me waiting.'

In the long silence life itself might have been suspended.

'When?' said Valerie, in a sudden recollection of anguish.

'To-morrow,' he answered, understanding the broken question.

Valerie raised her wet eyes.

'In my life there can be no to-morrow. God may not let me die, but my life will always be one long remembrance of to-day. I shall live in to-day always. To-morrows are for happier women, John. And yet I am wicked to say that. I would not change my lot with any other. For have I not my memories? And I will learn to have my hopes. And whenever that blessed day of release may come to me, I will bring my heart to you as it is to-day, my king!'

Rallywood looked into the beautiful tear-dimmed eyes. He was too wise to say that he had spoilt her life, that had it been possible to set the wrong right

by any sacrifice he would have done so. Of this he said nothing. He only kissed her.

'Next to living to be with you, darling, I am in love with dying for you, Valerie!'

The silence grew again between them, the best and saddest silence upon earth—the silence of all's said.

'And yet, John, I have one thing left to live for. I will live to see your name stand where it should. For men like you are only understood and honoured —afterwards,' she said presently.

Another man might have disclaimed all praise. Rallywood, who believed he deserved none, kept silence. He knew that to deny would be to wound. And he was fain to say to her a thing which was hard to say and hard to hear. But he was looking out into the troubled future, and his anxiety for her grew bitter upon him. So he nerved himself to the greatest sacrifice of all. And Valerie's next words gave him the opening he desired.

'Your sword——' she began.

'Is broken.'

'No, no! Anthony brought another to Count Sagan, not yours. Yours was not the sword of a traitor! That also I will keep.'

'Unziar—I thank him. And Valerie, listen! When they condemned me there was one vote in my favour. You can guess whose.'

'Anthony's?'

'Yes, Valerie, and he loves you, and I will not blame—I wish—I would ask——'

Valerie's glance met his. She understood.

'No,' she said; 'I will thank him, and like him dearly and pray for him, but not that—no, not ever that!'

A quiet knock on the door.

'And now it is good-bye.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

DUKE GUSTAVE.

WHATEVER may be said to the contrary, the fact remains that a little independent success acts on a morally weak man as a glass of wine upon a physically weak one. For a time it exalts and quickens him.

Duke Gustave of Maäsau was in a condition of mental exhilaration, and experiencing to the full the false sensation of strength thus created when Sagan was announced. Selpdorf, who had been listening for some minutes to his master's self-gratulations on the newly ratified British contract rose as if to take his departure.

'Wait, Selpdorf!' the Duke said.

'My lord has asked for a private interview, your Highness,' Selpdorf reminded him.

'Yes, but I have no private affairs to discuss with my cousin. Anything that need be said between us is better said before a witness,' replied the Duke. 'How do you suppose he will take the news of our agreement with England?'

Selpdorf's answer was slow in coming, and before he spoke Count Sagan strode into the room. He carried a sheaf of papers; his imperious temper was

wont to rush every business through to which he put his hand.

'I begged for a few moments in private with your Highness,' he said, with a glance at the Minister.

'Our good Selpdorf is too discreet to be considered a third,' answered the Duke blandly. 'He knows our secrets without being told them. Pray proceed, my lord; is there anything I can do for you?'

'Yes, sire; I wish to lay before you the matter I was forced to postpone at the Castle. I also made use of the opportunity to bring one or two papers relating to the Guard for signature.'

The Duke took the papers. He was seated at a writing-table, and he glanced carelessly over them as Sagan went on.

'Under your approval those papers include Lieutenant Unziar's appointment as captain, vice Colendorp——'

'Deceased,' put in the Duke with a sharp significance.

Sagan frowned. Gustave had a curious alertness about him to-night.

'Yes, poor fellow! We can ill spare him,' he said. 'Also we have agreed to propose Abenfeldt as junior subaltern.'

'I have no objection,' the Duke said.

'As for the other subject upon which I have for some time wished to speak to you, sire, I am authorised to lay before your Highness certain proposals—'

'Stop, my lord,' again interrupted the Duke, 'if those proposals have any reference to von Elmur and his projects for the good of the State, I absolutely decline to hear them. What's this?' he had laid aside the upper papers after signature, and was scanning the one below with an expression of countenance which showed that he liked what he read very little.

Sagan watched him with a deepening frown, the more subtle Selpdorf with curiosity. At other times it had been the Duke's custom to add his signature to papers without a glance at their contents. The destiny of one man is thus often decided by the passing mood of another.

'What's this about Rallywood?'

'A bad business, but your Highness's signature makes many a wrong right,' said Sagan, with a clumsy attempt at pleasantry; 'it needs only that. You have the pen and ink, sire.'

'But, by Heaven, not the will!' cried the Duke. 'I will not sign it! And if I will not, hey?'

'M. Selpdorf will assure you that it is necessary in the case of discipline,' urged Sagan with a lowering look.

'And I will assure M. Selpdorf that I am accustomed to make up my own mind! You know it already, Selpdorf!'

'I have always known it, sire,' said the supple Chancellor.

'You will hear my reasons?' asked Sagan angrily.

The Duke nodded.

'Captain Rallywood was guilty of gross disobedience of orders. His case has been laid before a court-martial of his brother officers, and he has been condemned to be shot. The trial has been conducted with justice.'

'What were Captain Rallywood's orders, then?'

'He was ordered to carry certain dispatches to the Chancellor, but he carried them elsewhere for his own purposes.'

The Duke nodded slowly and half closed his eyes. He remembered a certain damp morning by the river, when Rallywood had ridden to take orders from Selpdorf.

'So you are in this also, Selpdorf?' he said, 'What despatches were these? Pray tell me frankly. I believe I know something already.'

'Despatches sent to me from the Frontier, sire.'

'Which he failed to bring to you. Where then did he take them?'

The delay and the persistent unexpected questioning of the Duke irritated Sagan almost beyond endurance. He struck in.

'Sire, does it matter what he did with them, as we have proof that he disobeyed orders? That is the point—what need to ask further?' Then, as the Duke still shook his head, he burst out, 'Well, then, he carried them to the British Legation—to his own

countrymen, mind you. He was false to his oath as a soldier! He must be shot!'

Gustave of Maäsau was a man who lied much and often, as those of poor moral calibre will. He lied now with zest.

'So? Although Captain Rallywood acted under my personal instructions, Simon?' he said quietly.

Sagan sprang to his feet.

'Yes,' resumed the Duke, warming to his *rôle*. 'Yes, he acted under my orders, for the despatches were connected with the agreement I have within the last hour signed with England, and about which the first proposals were laid before me at midnight by the British Envoy during my visit to your Castle!'

'What?' shouted Sagan, as his house of cards fell about him. 'You lie, Gustave! And Germany? Selpdorf, we hold your promises! It is impossible to think this to be true?'

'It is true,' said the Chancellor. 'I beg you will recollect that his Highness is present, my lord. This excitement——'

Sagan stood gasping and staring. His passion seemed to choke him as he stood, but the Duke, still exalted by the sense of triumph and power, mistook the silence for speechless humiliation. His temper rose as the other's seemed to sink.

'You can deceive me no more, my lord Sagan!' he cried in a high excited voice. 'You took Colendorp from me, you would now take Rallywood, one

by one all my faithful Guard! But I am sovereign still! You shall not tamper any longer with my loyal State; you shall never bring your traitorous German schemes to an issue!'

But there were things impossible for Count Simon of Sagan to endure. Never before had he been twitted with impotence and failure. He could not survive so utter a defeat. A man to bear these things must be less thorough than the Count. He was too fierce, too imperious, to bear so great a reverse. If he must be put to shame before the world, if even a paltry captain of the Guard were to be permitted to negative his will, why then life had best be over!

He seemed to struggle for speech; at last, without warning, his passion leaped into flame. Like a wild beast he sprang across the table at the Duke—the poor snivelling coward who had dared to flay him with his tongue! The old hate fired the new fury as he clutched Gustave.

The Duke gave a shrill feeble cry, not such a cry as one would have expected from a man of his age, and then Selpdorf was between them shouting for the Guard.

'You false hound!' Sagan gnashed his teeth in Selpdorf's face as the Chancellor threw himself upon him.

Shouts and shots, and the wild turmoil of a deadly struggle. Then the Guard had secured Sagan. The Duke stood trembling and incoherent, leaning upon

the table, and between them, face downwards on the floor, the Chancellor with a bullet in his groin and for once playing a *rôle* he had not prepared.

Sagacious, supple, self-seeking, yet not utterly seared, in the last resort he offered up his life for the master he had almost betrayed.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FOR A SEASON.

QUEENS FAIN lies upon the inner edge of Lincolnshire, in an undulating countryside amongst great old trees, where of an evening the sun throws bars of light across the levels of turf, where homing rooks fly in scattered lines against a gleaming sky, the air breathes coolness and peace, and the scene lays that ineffable spell upon the heart of which only the exile can ever know the full pathetic power.

Round the house tall fences of yew and holly fend off the colder winds. On an evening in early spring Rallywood and Counsellor strolled under the shelter of a massive black wall of yew. The daffodils were blowing about the border of the lake below them, and along the distant hedges furry catkins were already nodding and floating on the crisp breeze.

'I have found it necessary once or twice before to say that you were a fool, John,' said Counsellor, looking up at a corner of the great stone-built mansion, its cold aspect yellowed and mellowed by the strengthening sunshine.

'Always or on occasion?' Rallywood laughed easily.

'Mostly. You will not leave the Guard. If I were you I should go tomorrow. Marry the girl as soon as she will let you, and bring her here. Then sit down and shoot partridges. She will like it. It is better than Maäsau.'

'It is altogether good to own the old place again,' Rallywood said, 'and we'll do our duty by the partridges, Major, you and I, I hope, by-and-by, but to do that and nothing else—not yet!'

'You've stalked bigger game and that has spoilt you,' grumbled the Major. 'After Count Sagan, partridges pall. Yet it is a pity.'

'I shall bring Valerie here sometimes, of course. I think she'll like the old place almost as much as I do.'

'More, since it is the birthplace and home of one John Rallywood,' said Counsellor with a twist of his big moustache. 'You lucky, undeserving beggar! So Selpdorf's gone. A queer compound.'

'His death redeemed—much,' said Rallywood, shortly.

'Yes,' Counsellor puffed out a great cloud of smoke, 'yes, but we have no reason to forget the fact that he was very ready to secure himself at a heavy cost to you.'

'For the sake of Maäsau,' interposed Rallywood.

'Hum—for the sake of Maäsau! And you were an inconvenient personality also. Well, well, let it pass. But it was touch and go with you, John, for no one could have foreseen that shaky old Gustave

would rise to the occasion as he did. And what has he done for you after all?'

'He saved my life first, and gave me the Gold Star of Maäsau afterwards,' said Rallywood, 'an honour which I share with some monarchs—and Major Counsellor.'

'Dirt cheap, too!' grunted Counsellor. 'I hear that Madame de Sagan sent you a very neat congratulation.

"A genoux sur la terre
Nous rendons grâces à Dieu
Et nous lui faisons vœux
D'une double prière."

You can take your own meaning out of it,' ended the Major.

'And the people being chiefly malicious will take the wrong one.'

'That is as it may be. But for you I hope a fine morning will follow the stormy evening. You will grow fat and selfish, John, like many a better man.'

Rallywood smiled. He was thinking of a certain elderly diplomat who, rumour said, had been moved out of his usual composure on one occasion only. It was at the moment when he heard that Captain Rallywood of the Maäsaun Guard was sentenced to be shot.

'By the way,' resumed Counsellor, 'did I tell you that I saw von Elmur yesterday at Charing Cross? He said he was starting for Constantinople. I bade him good-bye, but he corrected me, "Au revoir, my

dear Major," and kissed the tips of his fingers to me as the train passed. So perhaps the end is not yet.'

'God bless the present!' said Rallywood.

And while they walk and talk over the past and the future in the pleasant places of England, the surf is beating round an island off the Maäsaun coast, upon which a storm-stricken fortification has been adapted to the use of a certain political prisoner, Count Simon of Sagan. There he frets, and schemes, and longs through the endless afternoons. He does not accept his destiny as final, his hopes are unimpaired, his resolves as strong as in the old keen days at Sagan. He clings to a blind conviction that Time and the Man must inevitably meet together, and he lives for that meeting.

There, too, Anthony Unziar serves his country and his sovereign, relentlessly watchful through the dead monotony of the days. At his own urgent request he was given charge of the lonely prison, its solitude appearing to him the one bearable condition of life. He has his work to do and he does it well, and always between Count Sagan and his dreams stands the irrevocable figure of the young Maäsaun.

Sometimes Sagan taunts him with his hopeless love, but he only answers by a look. And each knows that wherever he may turn, he will find the other standing up against him—the fierce imbruted prisoner with his royal fearlessness, and his intense and frigid guard.

They are waiting. They have each his dream.

Sagan's of empire and revenge, for he is after all a splendid ruffian, untamable, gallant, a man who could never be compelled to cry 'Enough' to evil fortune.

Sometimes deep in the night, while the two enemies play their long games together, Sagan flings down the cards and laughs and speaks of another game which will find its conclusion in the dim paths of the future. But Unziar only smiles. If that day should ever come it will find him ready. But to-day is not to-morrow, and 'God bless the present!' as Rallywood said.

THE END.

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